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***Storytelling with UK
Centenarians
Being a hundred - it's just luck***

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To our editor, David Schofield, we offer thanks for leaving the centenarian voices intact.

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Introduction:

Being a hundred - it's just luck

Introduction

A centenarian is a person who has achieved the age of 100 years or more. In developed nations the fastest growing segment of the population is centenarians. There are currently more than 11,000 centenarians in the United Kingdom. The increase in centenarians has been related to fewer childhood deaths, advances in health care including the development of vaccines and medications, safe water supplies and better public health. Generally, we can all expect to live longer. Despite the rapid increase in the centenarian demographic, there is a paucity of research *with* centenarians. We think that it is important to listen to their stories and to find out how they have lived their lives and what they believe has contributed to their longevity.

During December 2009 and March 2010 the Universities of Surrey and Edinburgh published a press release requesting volunteers to participate in the study. Inclusion criteria were that participants should be aged more than 100 years old, willing to participate and able to tell their story. Within a few weeks local newspapers had covered information about the study and we started hearing from centenarians who wanted to participate. We gathered more than 30 names of centenarians from across the United Kingdom. Rose Turner, the research associate, made initial contact by telephone, and asked the contact person several questions to gather demographic details. These data included where the person was born, family composition, the centenarian's ability to tell his / her own story, memory status, level of independence or dependence on others for activities of daily living, and social and other supports received. Following a satisfactory screening, Tina, Pam and Nimmi undertook face to face interviews with centenarians in their own homes or care residences. Sixteen healthy volunteers were recruited from Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England and subsequently interviewed. Permission was granted to use actual names. The following table lists the centenarians interviewed.

Table1: Names, date of birth, birthplace, current location and type of abode

Chapter	Name	Born	Birthplace	Current location	Abode
1	Olive	Sept 1909	London	Camberley	Care home
2	Emily	August 1908	Rotherham South Yorkshire	Southampton	Care home
3	Hetty	October 1905	London	London	Sheltered accommodation
4	Albert	January 1908	Scarborough Yorkshire	Deal, Kent	Own home
5	Nita	March 1908	Manchester	Bury, Lancashire	With daughter
6	Alison	April 1907	Edinburgh Scotland	Edinburgh Scotland	Own home
7	Meg	August 1906	Dundee Scotland	Glasgow Scotland	Care home
8	Minnie	October 1907	Ballywhisken Northern Ireland	Belfast Northern Ireland	Own home
9	Jess	August 1908	Newcastleton Scotland	Penicuik Scotland	Care home
10	Edward	Dec 1903	Cardiff South Wales	Attleborough Norfolk	With daughter
11	Bob	March 1908	Kingston-upon- Hull	Alton Hampshire	Independent flat sheltered accommodation
12	Phyllis	August 1908	Gibraltar	Eastbourne	Own home
13	Alex	Dec 1909	Edinburgh Scotland	Currie Scotland	Own home
14	Marion	Feb 1908	Edinburgh Scotland	Juniper Green Scotland	Own home
15	Jessie	Oct 1908	Aldershot Middlesex	Aldershot Middlesex	Care home
16	Frank	Feb 1910	Birmingham	Hagley West Midlands	Sheltered accommodation with wife

Interviewing centenarians ‘at home’

The research team travelled to UK cities and towns including Belfast, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Bury, Birmingham, Alton and London. Although we did not travel to Wales or Yorkshire, some centenarians’ earlier lives had been spent in these locations. Edward now lives in Norfolk but he was raised in Wales where he lived independently until 2007 when his Cardiff house was damaged by fire. Emily now lives in Southampton and Albert in Deal but both were born in Yorkshire and chose to talk about their first jobs as adolescents in service and in the mines, respectively. So we were able to gather insight into the environments in which centenarians identify their early lives.

Storytelling

Centenarians were asked to talk about an aspect of their life and ageing they wanted to share, understanding that what they chose to tell would be available for public readership. Each person was asked to tell us in their own words, something about themselves and the social context that shaped their lives. Centenarians selected whatever was foremost in their minds and/or any aspect of their lives that they wanted to share. A conversational approach to interviewing was adopted although a number of semi-structured questions were included to encourage story telling such as: What is it like to have lived to 100 years and beyond? What, in your opinion is the secret of successful ageing? What matters to you today? In analysis we listened again to the interview recording, read and reread the verbatim transcription, and produced a story draft reducing 8000 words to an average of 3000 privileging the person’s own voice. The interviewer wrote the first story draft which team members then discussed, edited and generated a consensus story line. The resultant story was returned to the centenarian and / or significant other, usually a spouse, daughter or son who then corrected, added, validated and consented to publish the story using their own names.

Sixteen centenarians

We interviewed eleven (11) women and five (5) men with an average age of 101.4 years. Frank was the ‘youngest’, turning 100 two weeks before interview and Edward was the oldest, celebrating his 106th birthday on the day Pam and Tina interviewed him at Norfolk.

In terms of education there was considerable variation. Bob graduated with a marine engineering degree aged 21, Phyllis went to a convent school until she was eighteen and Alison went to Art College. Others left school around the average age of 14, which was the expected age at which to leave school in the 1920s but the majority said they would have liked to continue. As the oldest of nine, Minnie was only 12 when her mother required her help at home. She said ‘it broke my heart for a while. I loved school’. The Scottish centenarians tended to stay at school until they were at least 15 and Meg thought that the extra year of schooling gave you a better chance in life.

Most of the centenarians were raised in large families. Minnie was the oldest child of nine, Meg was the seventh child of ten and Bob was one of seven children. Edward was one of thirteen while Jessie was one of ten siblings. In many traditions being a seventh child is believed to give the individual the gift of foresight. Meg said ‘I often wondered if being the seventh child born on the seventh day of the month made me special’ while Hetty who was the seventh child of a seventh child while not claiming foresight admitted that her memory was exceptional.

The ‘Depression’ and financial problems during the 1930s meant that jobs and money were scarce and so many waited to marry until they were in their late twenties or early thirties. It also meant that they had to travel for work; Alex went from Edinburgh to

join the Metropolitan Police Force in London while Albert travelled from Yorkshire to the Kent coal mines.

All centenarians had married and had small families; on average they had two children. The opening up of opportunities for women was mentioned in the context of Women's Rights, the suffragette movement and birth control by both Alison and Hetty while Meg wrote to the newspaper to draw attention to people earning low wages and to call for the recognition they deserved for their hard work.

Six centenarians can be described as being born 'middle class'. Ten centenarians were raised in 'working class' families although they uniformly experienced upward mobility in later life. Several women talked about being in service aged 14, and working class men had jobs in the mines. Albert was 14 when he went into the pit and Edward became a carpenter whilst Frank worked in a factory where he became a foreman. Alison's story demonstrates a different experience growing up in a middle class family. She devoted most of her life to art because she had the support first of her parents and then her husband a fellow artist who taught at the local college while as a glass engraver she combined working at home on commissions with bringing up a young family. The first and second world wars created a backdrop to the majority of these centenarians' lives. In the First World War they remembered with sadness the young men who went to the front and never came back. During the Second World War many of them witnessed and were exposed to great personal danger. Jess said about the First World War, 'I remember thinking "goodness, I wonder when I'm grown up, will I forget about it?" I have forgotten, the tragedy of it, but it was terrible really'.

At the time of interview Albert, Alison, Minnie, Phyllis, Alex and Marion continued to live independently in their own homes. Nita and Edward each lived with a daughter. Hetty, Bob and Frank (and his wife Mary) lived independently in sheltered

accommodation. Olive, Emily, Meg, Jess and Jessie were living in residential care homes.

Being in residential care accommodation certainly required some of them to draw on their own financial resources to stay in a private room and utilise personal care services, meals and cleaning. Olive had a fall several years previously and lived with her daughter for a year but as her needs increased, sought a care home. Jess had a similar story. Emily was told her current care home in Southampton was closing down because it was no longer economically viable meaning she would have to find another home at 100. Although Emily was campaigning to keep the home open, in some ways for herself she did not really mind; she was bored and frustrated and looking forward to something new. In contrast to the media portrayal, perhaps, she did not perceive the move as a loss of home and friends rather as a new opportunity. And perhaps this was because at 100, she had itchy feet. However this is not the case for everyone in this age group. Changing living arrangements at this late stage has been shown to increase mortality for many after the upheaval of moving. Although these centenarians were able to manage their living arrangements from their own resources and with the help of their families the need for better financial and material support from local authority social services and the voluntary sector generally to support the growing cohort of people living into extreme old age needs urgent review.

Centenarians living independently managed their daily personal routines, requiring only some outside assistance with cleaning, gardening or shopping. Many of them often purchased the services of home helps, gardeners or cleaners if necessary. Frank was the only Centenarian who was caring for a spouse, his wife eight years his junior, about whom he said:

I've got a permanent job looking after my wife. Her memory is not very good and she is blind. It's a full-time job to get her washed and dressed. I'm more than a carer to Mary, I'm a nurse. I do everything.

One of the most interesting commonalities found across the sixteen centenarians was that they reported being very active well into their 80s or 90s. A few reported reduced activity levels only after crossing the centenarian threshold.

In the chapters to follow, you can read the centenarian's own words as they describe aspects of their lives that they would like to share. In the summary chapter we will share their 'secrets' of successful ageing, further commonalities among centenarians and their wishes for the future.

CHAPTER 1

OLIVE

Born September 1908



Introduction

Olive was born in London but now lives in Camberley, Surrey. She has a room overlooking a garden in a care home. Her son in law, John and her son Keith were present at the interview with Tina and Nimmi. It is normal for family member to be involved and, while John made a number of contributions, Olive was quite capable speaking for herself.

It is important to explain that the entire interview is digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Olive's story was then put together by the interviewer (Tina), and sent to her for her changes and validation. We invite the centenarian to add or delete paragraphs. Olive chose to write us a letter which is given as a postscript at the end of her story.

Olive's story

Let me tell you about my earlier life in London. My family lived in the East End of London. I had two sisters but I was the oldest. I can remember the German Zeppelin that came over in the First World War; they were the big air ships used for dropping bombs. I remember seeing that. And it went towards London. I don't know if it did any damage then, but I saw it go over and I was about ten at that time. And really it was quite dangerous because across the road was a big reservoir, it would have been terrible if it had burst, I imagine, with the water under the house. But that's a long time ago.

I went to an ordinary school but I left when I was 14. We had such a lovely headmistress. Despite it being such a long time ago I still remember her saying, "the reward of work is more work" (*all laugh*), I've never forgotten her saying that.

Yes the reward of work is more work. I've always worked. I used to make dresses for children, party dresses, in London, and in those days you could get to London for 6½ pence, return (*all laugh*), amazing isn't it?

I met my husband at the local church when I was about 16 and I have known him ever since. My husband used to take me to lots of places, before we were married; we used to go on holidays to Devon and Cornwall, so that was nice. We married when I was 22. Herb was 24 or five, that's when we got married and we found this nice flat in Haringey, you wouldn't know that probably. Haringey is a suburb in London. We had quite a nice flat there

I didn't have Rita for three years, but that was my wish. When we knew we were going to have Rita, we looked for a house in Chingford, and that was quite that. And we lived there till Rita was five and just about to go to school

When we were into the next war; we went under the stairs when the warning went, when the Germans were going to be flying over. We went under the floorboards. I saw the fire burning in the Thames when the Germans dropped the first bombs in the daytime; you could see all the flames. They wanted us to let the children go out of London. A lot of them went but I wouldn't let Rita go. We were lucky because a bomb was dropped fairly near, this great big thing fell in the forest there, quite near, so that was lucky. We used to have a steel shelter in the flat that's the Second World War. And I used to put the children in the room directly the air warning went and then get in myself quickly if I heard anything coming, so we spent quite a lot of time in there, in the shelter. And it was about as high as that, a little bit of table top. How I coped? Well, you can't do much else than just plod on, can you?

At the end of the war, if you had a house, with sitting tenants you couldn't evict them, so we had to take a flat. But it wasn't very nice there because it was a downstairs flat. There was a man upstairs, who walked about with great thick boots on lino, it was awful and I can still hear the noise. It was awful. Every move, you could hear in that downstairs flat. The flat was very small and my mother minded some of my furniture on the other side of London, we couldn't get it all in. We were there quite a while. How did I manage, well I didn't have any real friends there and no, with two children, I just jogged on I suppose.

My husband's job was moved from London to Northwood. It was to do with the London Stock Exchange, when he first started work, but after the war he came to work with the investments of the Army, Navy and Air Force at the United Service Trustees, in Pall Mall in London. He worked there until he was called

up. I'll never forget the day he went away, he was 30 then and the first thing they did after having been in an office all his life, made them run around Blackpool for their first training. But he was lucky because he signed on to be a wireless operator, so he was moved about in this country, but he didn't go abroad and he did manage to get home now and again. Yes, Herb was lucky that he wasn't moved out of the country but he was away from home four years. Keith hardly knew him, he was only two and a half then and we used to have... you probably wouldn't remember, a chenille tablecloth over the table which had like a pile on it and he used to sit and run all his Dinky toys over the cloth and the surface was bare (*all laugh*) where he'd worn it away.

During the Second World War I worked in the school in the meal service because I thought well I'd be with the children when they were on holiday. And the teachers were all quite chatty and one of them got a big parachute, yellow silk, and asked me if I'd make it into underclothes for her, so I made her underclothes with this parachute silk. And I used to help in the meals service; you have to put the tables up for about ten or 12 children, carry them in and put them up, and bring the food in. And afterwards we had to clear it up from the tables. And I got one shilling and four pence an hour for that. The council wrote a letter and said you must understand that there's no pension attached to this (*all laugh*). That was quite funny really, but they were quite a nice band of women that I worked with, so that was nice, yes. What happened after that? I worked in the big stationers in Harrow.

Eventually we moved to the council house in Northwood, which was quite a nice house, much bigger than the flat. Northwood is about 14 miles out of London in Middlesex. That's where I lived for most of my life. It's a part of the Borough of Hillingdon. It was a three bed-roomed house with garage space and a big garden; it was quite a nice house. It was like heaven after living in that flat.

For years I worked in a nice shop in Northwood that sold lovely things; carpets and curtains. I worked until my husband had his stroke. Not full-time, just a few days a week but unfortunately had to work weekends, so that's when Keith learnt to cook, my son, he's quite good at cooking now.

Herb had a stroke very soon after he retired, he retired when he was 65. I've always thought that was through stress. He had four strokes. Luckily for me, he never lost his speech. Some people can't speak anymore, but he didn't lose his speech. But I had to wheel him in a wheelchair if we went out. I don't know how I managed the wheelchair up the hill. Despite the fact he had his stroke, he had a good sense of humour, and he never stopped giggling. He would start telling a joke and was laughing so much about it, he couldn't finish it. He was a nice man. I don't remember ever quarrelling with him.

Herb worked for the United Services Trustee after he came out the RAF. He had very good friends, just a small staff and the head of the United Services Trustees recommended him for the MBE. The United Services Trustees invested monies so that the rewards from those investments could be distributed to servicemen who were unwell, disabled, injured at war or whatever. So it was a sort of benevolent fund for the services. That was why he was awarded a MBE.

We were at the MBE ceremony the same time as The Beatles. They went up Pall Mall in a car with all the windows blacked out and we came up behind in an ordinary taxi, so we followed them into the Palace. It was in the Ballroom with all the people and they had an orchestra playing in there and eventually all the men had to line up and follow each other to the front of the Queen. I think she had something pinned on their jackets, a medal. The Queen talked a long while to The Beatles because at that time, they were bringing a lot of money into the country. They were funny little men, they were all short (*all laugh*), all dressed in black with funny hairstyles and funny coloured shoes and she talked with them

ages. And when The Beatles came out into the retiring room, my husband asked them for their autographs and Rita sold them for over a thousand pounds some years ago at Sotheby's.

I lost my husband a long time ago. Thereafter I lived by myself in Northwood for over 20 years. Melanie, a friend from church, used to do any jobs I wanted doing and the shopping. I managed quite well. I knew the people at the church. I was in contact with them and I saw Melanie every day, or quite often. Oh yes, I knew quite a lot of people.

But then once you fall over, it changes everything, doesn't it? I fell over on my knee, trying to put the milk bottle on the step, that started it all off. I'd gone up to bed and I was not sure whether I'd bolted the door for security purposes and so when I checked the door opened and I fell. Fortunately, the door was unlocked. Then a very charming young couple passed by and picked me up and asked me if I was alright. They helped me upstairs to bed. Then I remembered that the bolt was not across the door. So I went down again put the bolt across the door and fell again, but this time, the door was locked. Luckily I had a security alarm button round my neck. But I lay on the floor a long time before I realised that I could reach the security alarm. I pressed the button and my friend Melanie, was alerted but she couldn't get in, she should have had the key, but she had to break the glass door to get in, she smashed open the (*laughs*) front door. She had to throw a brick through the window. When they picked me up the ambulance people trotted me straight off to hospital. They tested me everywhere in case I'd broken anything. And then I was taken to that care home at Eastcote where I stayed for six weeks. I felt very insecure after that fall and had difficulty to walking. Every time I stood up, I thought I was going to fall down.

Then I lived with my daughter and son in law for 15 months but I got too much... or too heavy to handle. Luckily we found this nursing home in the brochure. Yes

my life has changed but it has changed for the better, definitely upward. I've been away from Northwood for more than five years.

It is good in this nursing home because there's always someone around. The carers are very kind. It's quite a family atmosphere. There are a lot of activities to keep us busy, but now that I am 100 I do as I like. I like to watch TV. I am very interested in people so I prefer live television; it has to be live so I will watch programs like *Loose Women*. I don't like to miss these shows.

I've got arthritis everywhere. And I've had that hip done and it's so long ago, it's coming to life again I think but I don't want to think about it. They've got some cream they use here which I rub in every night and this shoulder that I fell on, when I fell by the front door, so I have a lot of that rubbed in. I take pain tablets. The doctor comes to the nursing home every Tuesday. My eyesight has deteriorated a little bit over the years. I have some new glasses to look in, I've only got a little tiny piece here to read with and I don't think it's big enough because I find I'm writing there and I'm ending up there, so I'm sure they're not... I don't think the enlargement is big enough, they are bi-focals. They said they'd come back but they haven't yet. I know my eyes have deteriorated because I used to have very good eyesight and I used to love reading but I don't do that much now.

I've led a good, clean life, don't drink excessively and I hate smoking. We weren't well off but we had good food, my mother was quite a good cook. I remember once when my dad had a job, we went away to the seaside and we ate a whole leg of meat in one meal, I can remember that in those days. My normal diet included suet puddings and lovely dumplings; my mum was quite a good cook - and nice cake. What did I cook for Herb? Oh, the same sort of things I expect, he used to gobble it up anyway. My teeth have gone since I've been in

here, so I can't chew very well, so I have soup when I can and they put the meat through a liquidiser, they're very good like that.

If I could wish for one thing now, what would it be? It would be to make my legs walk. I can only stand up a minute or two and it's so frustrating, I see things I want to do but I daren't get up, I mustn't get up, I think I'll move that there over there and I can't. And living here I noticed that carers are always in such a hurry because they have such a lot to do, so they can't often stop long. In the afternoon, they might get a little quieter, but there are 42 people here to be looked after, but none of the carers can spare much time. I have two friends here, but it's difficult to have a conversation with the other residents.

The nicest thing about being 100? Nothing, I don't want to get old, I'd rather get younger (*all laugh*) I think I'm interested in everything in modern life, I can't do the modern things like that email, or use computers.

I'm a good listener and I like watching things live on TV, so I keep up with current affairs. I've seen three wars and this one going on Afghanistan is awful. I feel sorry for the poor men, they know they're going to be murdered, they just walk along and they're shot down and the poor wives, some of them, some soldiers have never seen their children, dreadful, to have to face your life alone. I would be lost without the television.

Also I think a family atmosphere is important in a nursing home. I wouldn't like it to be all ordered about and everything, I wouldn't like that. It's very nice here really for a nursing home because you hear such awful things, don't you?

My advice to others is having visitors. Seeing my children is important. I see Rita and John more because they only live in Camberley, but Keith tries to come fortnightly, but his wife, she's not awfully well, she's got trouble with her ankle and she doesn't want to go out an awful lot so he does quite a lot of things by

himself. But it's always jolly when he comes, isn't it John? We have a good laugh (*laughs*).

Post script: Letter from Olive received January 2010

Thank you for coming to see me and for the long talk. Later I thought of more I could have said such as I had a miscarriage and was in hospital for two weeks after Rita and Keith were born. We had a house later and but we had to move to West of London when my husband was called up. He was 30 and away for four years, home only for short breaks.

I remember going back to school we saw a comic called The Rainbow and after lunch we had a penny or half penny for sweets which were two pennies a quarter. When I was about eleven the best singers were taken to London to hear a famous singer whose name was Dame Clara Butt. I always remember it as quite an adventure.

When Keith took his degree we went to the Albert Hall on another great occasion. I have seven grandchildren and 14 great grandchildren

Thank you again for your attention

Olive

CHAPTER 2

EMILY

Born August 1908



Introduction

Snow and ice in January 2010 had led to train delays on the route London Waterloo to Southampton, but John, Emily's son was at the railway station patiently waiting in his car. It was a twenty minute drive to Emily's Nursing Home, Birch Lawn Care, which we had heard was to be closed down. Emily, born 101 years ago, has to find a new care home. John was greeted warmly by staff. He is obviously well known and liked. Emily was sitting on her bed, resting her arthritic legs. A walking frame stood near her bed. She wore a bright pink cardigan, and I (Tina) noticed her beautiful silver hair which she later told me she had dressed each week. Eye brows were pencilled and her finger nails were pink. I could see that she took pride in her appearance. Her room was cluttered and she explained that she had moved from a larger room upstairs when her walking had become difficult.

The most remarkable aspect of the interview was her constant laughter. She is a natural story teller. Born in a house snug between the steel factories of Rotherham, Southern Yorkshire, she described her first work experience in service at age thirteen. Married to a professional footballer, they made their home in Southampton after Jack could no longer play. Despite many losses in her life, including the deaths of her husband and three sons, she described herself as lucky.

Emily's story

I've had a hard life. I always worked hard, you know, I've worked since I was 13. When I first went into service I couldn't cook or do anything. I was found out in a lie, well not really. When I first came for the job, I was pushing my little brother Harry down the street and I had need of a toilet. I remembered a house and a young lady, she was in one of those long chairs, and I think she couldn't walk. I had seen her before. She was a lovely girl. So I thought I'd ask her. I said 'hello' then I asked 'could I use your toilet?' She said, 'certainly' and I went. When I came out I heard a voice saying 'hello, hello little girl'. I was a bit surprised and said quickly 'I didn't do anything', you know. (*laughter*) And she said to me, 'would you like a job, would you like to work for me?' And I said, 'Oh yes', I didn't say I was still a school girl. What's your name? And I told her. Emily Worrall. 'All right Emily', she said, 'I'll go and see your mother. Tell her I'll see her at 4 o'clock'. Of course I went back home then and told my mother. At 4 o'clock she arrived and said 'I like the look of Emily and I'd like her to work for me', so that's where it started. The lie came in because I told them that I was older than I was (*laugh*), not that I couldn't cook.

It was a funny thing, because it was Sunday, and they were going to church. Mrs Poole, that was her name, came down to the kitchen and said, 'will you be all right with the dinner Emily?' Well, I had to say yes, didn't I? This was what frightened me mostly. I didn't know what I was going to do. There was a large family, and I had never cooked in my life. My only experience was watching my sister do it; she cooked and I cleaned. I went out and I thought I just have to cook. I set the table, and I had never set a table before in my life. But it was all right, I put the bottle of wine of the table. So I just cooked as I remembered, cleaned the veggies, made the dinner with Yorkshire pudding. I made it downstairs and then I carried the food upstairs. And when I did it just looked so fan fare, you know. And then she rang when she had

finished dinner, I went upstairs and she said, 'that was a very enjoyable meal, Emily'. That was a good start. Yes I am a good observer.

I worked for the Poole family for three years. He was an iron magnet. Then I left, I just needed a change. First I worked next door, that was where the money was, and then and I had a job with a jeweller, further down the same road, that was. But he had a son, whose name was Douglas. He made a nuisance of himself. He wouldn't leave me alone. I was sat in the kitchen one day having my tea and he came in and put his hand on my knee. I remember it like it was yesterday. I said 'excuse me that is my leg'. 'Oh', he said, 'Sorry, I thought it was the table leg'. I left after that, I went back to the Poole family, who were pleased to have me. But I had to leave because of him, he kept following me around. I never told anyone about Douglas. I couldn't tell my Dad, he would have thumped him. When Dad asked why I left I just told him I had asked for a raise and they couldn't afford it.

Although I was at school I didn't have much schooling. I had St Vitas Dance; do you know what that is? I couldn't control the movement of my legs; it was 'dance like' so I was six months in bed. After that I never had an illness. I've been lucky, really. Now I've got arthritis, my legs are very bad, see my knees. My sister used to say to me, when I got down on the floor, you'll pay for that later on, you should put a cushion under those knees.

My mother died when I was thirteen. She had a fall, and a bleed inside her head and she didn't wake up. She was only 44 years old. And when she died my dad gave everyone a golden guinea, they were so good to her in that hospital. We were nine children, and my Dad looked after us. Our house was wedged between the steel works. All my dad had to do was walk out the front door and across the road to the factory at Rotherham South Yorkshire.

How did I meet my husband, well that's another story (*laugh*). There were four of us girls Iris, Elsie, Agnes and me. My friend Agnes became the actress in Coronation Street. Any way, we always went out on a Sunday. We walked around the town... we called it 'boy searching ... we walked around the park. Of course I had to be home at a certain time because my Dad was very strict. Well, this Sunday we were walking home, all four of us, and we saw these tall fellows, tall men. And when I passed them I pinched one tall man on the bum (*laugh*) I walked on and I thought to myself 'Oh now I've done it', and I looked round and there he was standing beside me. I said I don't talk with strange men. 'But you pinch their behinds, don't you!' he said. Then he asked could he walk me home. I said, 'I don't mind'. So off we went.

On the way home I said to him, 'what do you do then?' He said, 'I'm a footballer, a goal keeper'. And I thought, anyone can tell you he's a footballer. Then I said, 'what's your name?' 'Jack Turner', he said. Well when I got home I could not wait to tell Billy, my brother. So I hurried upstairs and said to my little brother, do you know Jack Turner the professional footballer? Yes, he said. Well go downstairs as he has just walked me home! Billy said 'you're a liar'. 'Just go down the passage and have a look'.

He asked me to meet him the next night. At first I didn't think I'd go and then I thought, why not? I was wearing my other clothes, you know, you have two sets, one for during the week and best for Sunday. Well, I arrived outside the hippodrome and I waited and waited. I thought to myself, you are an idiot; of course he won't turn up. There was a man waiting. After a while he turned around and said, are you Emily? Well I'd changed my clothes and he'd changed his and we had not recognised each other! Oh dear, Oh dear. Well, that was the beginning of our relationship.

I always went to the football. I loved it. I used to get so excited; I was at a match one day, and didn't realise I was hitting the man in front of me on his back. I was

thumping him on his back, squealing! Yes, Jack played for Stockport, Wolverhampton and Watford. But he was in football when it didn't pay. Look at what they earn today. He got four shillings for a draw and eight shillings for a win. That was all. I do like to watch football even today.

I loved dancing. Jack didn't. Well, he did once. I was dancing with this fellow. And the next thing, there was a tap on my back. It was Jack and he said, 'come on, we will dance'. And he took me around. I said to him, 'I thought you said you couldn't dance'.

When Jack broke his leg, we left Yorkshire. His football career was over and he became a policeman in Southampton. I didn't want to go. But he said, 'you'll do as I say'. It was like that back then, we did what our husbands wanted. He selected Southampton because as a child he liked to come down here for his holidays and he thought he'd like to live here. We have been here ever since, although Jack has been gone many years now. I wouldn't have anybody else, although I've had two marriage offers.

I remember two wars. I saw the German Zeppelin that came over in the First World War. In the second war I was eight and half months pregnant when we heard the aeroplanes in the distance. I tried to get under the table but I wouldn't fit. *(laugh)* We had food rationing after the war but we didn't go hungry.

I worked until I was in my 70s, but I didn't tell anyone at work how old I was. My job was in the cinema complex, and yes, I saw a lot of films. I liked the social side of work, yes, I enjoyed working and it was a good friendship circle.

Until six years ago I lived in my own house with my other son, Raymond. Then he got cancer and died, so then I had to come here. When Raymond died from bowel cancer I wished it had been me instead of him.

I'm lucky as I still have one son, John. And I see him often. He is my life. He's all I've got. But I have had a good life. I like going to the OAP club every week with John. We always win something; last week we came home with three gifts.

I like it in this Nursing Home but as you know it is closing down soon. I am looking for another home in this vicinity. It's such a pity this home has to close down. I don't really do anything much here. All I do is come to bed. Yes they have activities but ... I am bored, I am frustrated. I'd like to be able to do my own bedroom. I used to turn it out every day. Now I can't do it. I can't get around. I've had bad falls. My legs give away.

The advice I'd give to someone is to look after themselves. It doesn't feel any different to be one hundred. No I don't feel any different. I don't know how I deal with losses but I do. I just get on with it.

CHAPTER 3

HETTY

Born October 1905



Introduction

Hetty is a Londoner. Reg, her husband began his life in East London on Montague Road, just around the corner from her birth place. They were both members of the Hackney Independent Labour Party in the 1920s. Prior to the interview Pam and Tina had seen Hetty, then aged about 100, in a BBC documentary. She was holding a sign ‘OUT’ and ‘BLIAR’ marching with a crowd down London’s main streets in an attempt to stop war. Hetty is still an anti war activist.

In Hetty’s story, living in London in the 1920 & 1930s meant being involved in social justice issues, women’s rights and setting up a progressive school at Beacon Hill with Bertrand Russell’s wife, Dora. Listening to Hetty it felt as if we (Pam and Tina) were talking to a contemporary as she participates fully in events of the day.

Hetty lives independently in sheltered accommodation not far from where she has lived all her life. Both daughters visit and take her out to political events regularly.

Hetty's story

As a child, I had this wonderful eldest sister, Cis, who was eleven years my senior. She was really more like my mother than my mother was because mother still had babies after me, so she was busy with babies. So Cis was the one who sang lullabies to me, folk songs, told stories, either read them or made them up, not only to me, to the sister nearest to me in age, the one three and a half years older, and she used to put us to bed at night.

I was nearly nine when World War I started, so I have very vivid memories of that war, I remember waving to the men leaving because there was a railway line that I passed on my way to school every day, with my younger brother and my older sisters. And we could look through the railings down at the railway line and the trains and we saw the men leaving for the front, and, of course, we waved. It didn't take very long before what war really means became evident because the trains didn't take six months before they were coming back with the men who wore red, white and blue: red ties, white shirts, blue trousers, in case they forgot the Empire There would be a sleeve rolled up because there was no arm to put in it, or a trouser leg rolled up So I think that began my political awakening. I remember my father telling me that 1914 was a totally unnecessary war: it had no real objective. He said, "If Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman hadn't died a year after he was elected, there would never have been a war in 1914." I was only one year old, so I personally had no recollection of this great, great event in 1906, or a man called Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman. I've never forgotten his name because I heard it so often and it sounded very musical to me (*laughs*).

As sisters we went to our first political meeting, which was at the lovely Queens Hall in Langham Place, which was bombed out in World War II. It was the place for the

wonderful prom concerts that Sir Henry Wood conducted and where Dame Nellie Melba (*laughs*) gave her farewell concert (*laughs*).

Cis married in 1916 during World War I and a year later, as was usual in those days, I don't think marriage stamps had yet appeared on the scene, she was the first woman who began teaching birth control following Dr. Marie Stopes. There was a slogan, you know, ice cream men at that time used to cycle or tricycle with their ice... and they had a thing stuck on the front, a big label: "stop me and buy one," a wafer or a cornet. Marie Stopes' slogan was 'buy me and stop one' (*all laugh*). I only learnt this, years later when I knew what birth control meant. Hers was a revolution for women; it was the beginning of women's emancipation. The message was that you could plan your families.

You know I am of Jewish origin but I have no religious beliefs, I'm a member of the Humanist Society and people's religious opinions are their private affair. I never ask anybody "are you a believer?" In my opinion, it's a private thing. But there are two aspects I query: why a god needs a beautiful building like our cathedrals are, they are beautiful places to go to sit in just for a little while, there is an atmosphere of peace and, how can one describe it? A place of solitude in a way. The quiet and the peace. You can meditate with yourself when there are no services. I've never been to a service in a cathedral actually, no, but I think they're beautiful buildings. At the same time, my common sense says to me, why should a god need a beautiful building? What does it mean to a god? It's a spirit.

I just accepted that I was Jewish and my parents were orthodox and there were certain things I couldn't do on Friday after sundown and all day Saturday. You couldn't go to the cinema, even though Saturday mornings - there used to be special cinemas for

children at a special low rate - because it meant handling money and that wasn't allowed. Money doesn't come into it on the Sabbath day. But I had a very happy childhood.

My parents loved each other; I never, never heard my father raise his voice in anger nor quarrel with my mother. Mother's rule was the home. The domesticity of the family that was her domain. She was the queen. But politics, anything out of the home, wasn't for women or females, but father changed when my oldest sister married and became quite independent, then he began to realise she also could think about society. And my sister was one of three Jewish women contemporaries, and it was very, very unusual, who let it be known that they were interested in the world outside their husband, children and the kitchen. One of them was the mother of the poet/scientist known as Bronowski who wrote *The Ascent of Man*.

Jacob Bronowski's mother was one of "The Three Musketeers". Cis and I were influenced by these "Musketeers" as Jewish women who spoke openly about social affairs and went to meetings. The suffragette struggle was practically over by the time they were married and independent and all of them had husbands who were in awe of them (*laughs*). Jacob Bronowski's father was an orthodox Jewish man who adored his wife; he would fast on the Day of Atonement and spend the whole day in the synagogue, while his wife entertained us. When my elder daughter was a little baby, we always knew the date of the fast we'd spent with Mrs Bronowski.

I was a very happy member of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), a very fine branch in Hackney. We met over the library in Mare Street, because that was already post-World War I and the majority of the men had been conscientious objectors in World War I, the ILP was more or less a (*whispers*) pacifist body. And then Tom, after one of

the meetings, brought his wife and she was Jewish. So here was our first introduction to intermarriage of contemporaries. And even in 1925, it was still able to produce a shock.

I was by that time a member of the ILP and I was known as a “dues collector”: I was given a list of people from whom to collect dues and every month I went round to get the monthly subscription. My dear man who was to become my husband had just come back from holiday. But before I tell you about our first meeting I want to talk about 1926.

It was in 1926 - the year of the miners’ lockout - which was followed by the General Strike that ended in total failure. The miners were starved into accepting the awful decisions of the mine owners, which was to knock a penny off their hourly pay, and to add an hour onto the working day. It had been a seven-hour day and the mine owners, mines were privately owned, wanted to turn it into an eight-hour day and to reduce the amount of money. I still remember we chanted. “Not an hour on the day! Not a penny off the pay!” Now, it was well established statistically, that with mine accidents, the largest percentage of those accidents occurred in the last hour of work. And that was in the time of the seven-hour working day. We all knew what forcing them to work an extra hour would mean. My father had nothing to do with the mining industry but he had every sympathy for the men who went down and hewed the coal and this was long before machinery was introduced, it was hacking with pick axes. And women were down the mines still in my youth, they were the horses that drew the containers with the hewed coal. You know, years and years and years later, it still brings tears to my eyes, and there have been many films made. The bell would be sounded when there was an accident, and I’m talking about South Wales, the Rhondda Valley. The bell would be incessant. The women would run out to see if it were her son or her husband or her father. You see, you didn’t know till the bodies came out.

If you lived in an area where there was coal, it was the job you did but of course, it wasn't the whole of Britain, and the story of the Wool Trade in Yorkshire also had its awful side. Those women, when the looms were first introduced, would bring their babies and children, who sat near the machine while they worked. Now it seems as uncivilised and awful.

I hope within a very few years, all of the world, people will realise that wars and killing each other, adults *killing* each other for what reason? What is there that you can't sit round a table and discuss? You do it in the end after the killing. It's still not a world I made.

Reg and I were born within 500 yards of each other. His road, Montague Road, was really a continuation of Colvestone Crescent, my end was near Kingland Road; the Montague Road end was near Mare Street. Bevis was a lodger with Reg's mother. He was a civil servant with two older sisters back in Sheffield. Bevis came from a mining family. In 1926, the Labour Party issued a call for a door-to-door collection for the miners and because Bevis came from a mining community, he wanted to help the miners. So he reported to the Labour Party headquarters and said that he would participate in the house-to-house collection for the miners and he and Reg went along and were given collecting tins. People were very generous; I don't think that there was ever a door shut in their face because they were in Hackney. When they took the collecting tins back to the Labour Party room, this is how Reg described it over and over and over again, when people asked him how did you come into the Labour Party? He said, "well, Bevis and I, we were there, waiting to hand in our collecting tins and a white-haired, rather nice older lady sitting in a corner" ... he heard someone say, "oh, take the collecting tins from these three young men, they're not Labour Party members

and they probably want to get away.” And this lady said “well, why aren’t they members? Give them a form, give them a form.” So they were all given forms to fill in, well the only one that filled it in was Reg. When I came back from holiday that August, I was given a sheaf of application forms and one of them included his... I couldn’t read his initials, but I went along to the house and rang the bell and a diminutive little woman with bright blue eyes came to the door. I said, “Could I speak to Mr... Mr... N. Bower?” “N. Bower? There’s no N. Bower, what’s it for?” So I said, “Well, I’m from the Labour Party.” “Oh, that’s our Reg!” She called up the passage, “Reg, Reg, there’s a lady here asking for you and you know it’s your handwriting again my poor boy, she asked for Mr N. Bower.” That was my introduction to my future husband.

He wasn’t Jewish. I thought, “He’s got a nice face and got ever such a nice smile” but he wasn’t Jewish. To be honest, I can’t even remember whether I thought that. It probably just never entered my mind. Every Friday evening was our ILP branch meeting and we had to pass Reg’s door, you know, Montague Road, coming home to my home. And usually accompanied by half a dozen or eight other people we’d go to my home and we’d drink coffee or tea and eat my mother’s lovely homemade cake, which was a sort of postscript to the meeting. In 1928, 1929 and 1930, a group of us went to Germany, to the Schwarzwald, the Black Forest, and it was the first time we met fascists. We stayed in the Jugendherberge, the Youth Hostel Association which was born in Germany and that was when we first heard the phrase “Heil Hitler”.

Reg and I spent holidays together in 1930... we lived together during these holidays but we wanted to live together permanently. Although we knew we wanted to marry in 1930 we had to wait until 1932. Reg’s family needed his financial contribution and we needed new furniture and all sorts of things. At that time I was approaching 28 and the superstition was that if you didn’t have your first child before you were 30, it was

very dangerous, so we decided we'd better start our family very quickly. Celia was born in 1933.

My sister, my beloved eldest sister, had to bridge the gap. With my having lost all sense of religion, Jews and non-Jews didn't mean anything, and I was an ILP and a socialist. And I wasn't living at home, so Reg was a frequent visitor to the tiny little room. Anita thought marriage was outdated and so she would not attend my wedding and my parents disapproved. My mother said to Reg, "Reg, you knew how much we loved you, how could you do this to us?" He was a frequent visitor to the home and she was devoted to him and my father was very fond of him but they never thought of him becoming a son-in-law. That was a different thing. But my sister Cis talked my parents into being human and said, "Reg isn't a stranger to Jewish ways". Cissy, before the cancer was destroying her, managed to persuade them then brokered the relationship back between my parents to encourage them to think about accepting my marriage to Reg. I pay tribute to Cissy. One day Cissy decided that she really ought to go and see a doctor. And in fun, she said, "oh, my little cancer, it's painful," and we all laughed at the idea of cancer in our Cis, she'd never had a day's illness in her life. She was 37 when she died. I wish my sister hadn't died when she did.

When I was 15 and a half, I left school to go into father's business because my sister Ada got married, so I was the next one who had to go into his business. The business was beginning to crumble as World War I affected it very much. 1924 was a very bad year for him. I was working in my father's business and I said "Cis, I'm fed up with it, I'm not needed in the business, I just hate it and I'd like to use the knowledge that I've got." I was aiming to go right through to become an accountant, but getting married stopped that. I said to my sister, "Cis I want to go and get a job, you talk father round." And father's first reaction was, "What? My daughters going out to work? Can't I afford to keep my daughters?" And Cis said "no, frankly, you can't. It's all very well,

you say when they need a new pair of shoes they go to mama and mama decides yes, they do need it, and then mama asks me for the money and then we go and buy them from Auntie Annie in Hoxton. The girls want their own pocket money, they want to do things.” Father, who was a little bit in awe of this eldest daughter, apart from loving her very much, listened to her and said, “well, if you think it’s alright for her, but mind, she’s got to be home by four o’clock every Friday and no working on Sabbath”. So Cis said, “Oh, she’ll work for a Jewish firm.” So I went to an organisation known as the Sabbath Observance Bureau, which was in Whitechapel somewhere and said “I’m so and so” and gave my particulars and this, that and the other. I rather think my father’s reputation was such then already, because he was a member of the Jewish Board of Deputies and all sorts of committees connected with the Greenards, new immigrants from Poland and what was Czechoslovakia, the Habsburg Empire really. And father would help in arranging that they should go and learn how to do this, that and the other, mostly in the needle trade, making trousers or sewing buttons or whatever.

Anyway, father was known as that, so when I said to my eldest sister, “I want to go out and get a job and register with the Sabbath Observance Bureau,” they sent me to look for them in the Whitechapel, the Jewish quarter, and said, “Well, what references have you got?” “Well, I don’t have any, I haven’t had a job before, I’ve worked for my father.” “Well, who’s your father? What’s your father?” “Mr. Rimmel.” “What, Rimmel, the egg merchant?” “Yes.” I’m now doing Jewish gestures, “Who wants a reference? Mr. Rimmel is your father? I should ask for a reference?” So I go back to my father and he wants to know who it is I’m working for, so I said, “Mr. Lyons, they manufacture blouses”. And I was to be the bookkeeper.” And my father said, “Lyons? Lyons in Brick Lane? My daughter doesn’t work for the fire mongers!” (*laughs*) Apparently, it was known that people sometimes deliberately set fire to their businesses to claim the insurance, making sure that they didn’t have anything that was

saleable burnt on the premises. This particular man (*laughs*) had had a fire but he was very stupid and he left the paraffin cans in the back garden and when the insurance people came, the paraffin cans were found and it was established that a fire had been deliberately started. So not only didn't he get any insurance money, he served six months in jail and my father strongly objected to his daughter working for anyone that had been in jail. But I said, "oh but daddy, oh, he does respect you because when he asked for a reference and I said I'd never worked for anybody but my father and he asked who my father was, when I mentioned your name, he said, 'oh, you're Mr. Rimmel's daughter! Well, who wants a reference?'" So father, of course, preened himself a little bit and then my sister said, "father, she's got to start somewhere, she already hasn't got any references from a previous employer, so let her go there and start to work, then she'll get a reference and can get another job if she wants", which I did do, very shortly, but not until I'd left home. Then I got a job as head of the accounts department in the Outsize House Limited of Clapham Common. I had three girls and a boy under me; I was the boss of the office.

Well, working there was an eye-opener to me. I'd heard that men told questionable stories in their working day, but I didn't know girls ever did the same... oh no, that was something quite out of my social zone. All these girls, the sales and purchase ledgers, the petty cash book person, I was head of the whole lot. All they wanted was to get married and not have to work. To them, marriage meant you didn't work anymore. Well, it was quite true, women who married left their jobs, teachers had to leave teaching if they married, so when I broke loose and was no longer under the parental roof, I never let on that I was married when I became head of the counting house. I was just Miss Rimmel. And then one morning I had morning sickness (*all laugh*) and one of the girls heard me because the loo was down in the basement where the safe was kept. "Miss Rimmel, morning sickness?" By which time I knew I would

be leaving in July anyway with Celia due in October, so I said “yes, but it’s all quite legal” (*all laugh*).

And very, very quickly, we moved to Fortis Green. Celia was due in a month’s time and Beatrix Tudor-Hart, who was a well-known educationist, was opening a progressive nursery school and was looking for premises and mentioned a certain area. She wanted potential people to write in to her if they would be interested in details. I certainly was interested in a progressive nursery school, because in those days the nursery schools attached to the council, the state nursery schools, asked, after name, address and date of birth, religion. My husband wasn’t a Jew and had no belief in the hereafter any more than I had, so I wasn’t going to have my children subjected to doctrine that was questionable. We were not going to dictate to them what they should or shouldn’t believe, but they were going to learn that there were other theories about the creation of the world.

When War broke out in ’39, Beatrix had made an arrangement with Dora Bertram-Russell that their schools would now amalgamate lock, stock and barrel, so all the kids went to the Russell School in Sussex or Hampshire; I can’t remember which, in two coach loads. But within two weeks, our cook, our lovely Suzie, said to Beatrix, “I’m sorry, either the cats go or I go; 36 cats jumping onto my table where I’m preparing food, no way.” Apparently Dora Russell had a craze for cats as well as children; she loved kids, but 36 cats at various stages, no, no, no. So it was the phoney war in ’39 because the whole of September, October, November, December, there was no sign of any war, so they all came back to London, the kids.

I went to help an organisation that had come into being called The Czech Refugee Trust Fund. Sir Nicholas Winton, who is now 101 plus, was the man who organised

the Kinder Transport. And he was a Jew after my own heart because when the Jewish Board of Deputies enquired of him, “are you making sure these Jewish children go to Jewish homes?” he said, “you’re interested in saving souls... I’m interested in saving lives.” He never queried whether they were Jewish or not Jewish they just went to good loving families.

At the moment, there is a body that has called for the renewal of the UN to make it of real importance, because a lot of people of your generation don’t know what I’m talking about when I refer to the UNA, the United Nations Association. No, but it is the Association for the United Nations and I must end on this note. I always listen to the Radio Four News at 7am and about a year and a half ago, the Radio 4 announcer was giving the news and said, “of course, war in Europe is unthinkable because we now have a united Europe.” So I shouted back at my radio and said, “But what about we have United Nations? Why are nations still fighting?” But the radio didn’t answer.

What’s important to me now? Peace. Three quarters of what I’ve told you is totally unimportant, the only important thing was my marching against the Iraq war and marching on all the peace marches, being a member of CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament), being a member of MANA, which is Musicians against Nuclear Arms, and I was at a MANA concert the night before last. And I do sleep very well, deep breaths. The night carer, who is a lovely person, a lovely woman, she says in the morning... because she comes in to say goodbye as well, just round about seven I’m one of the few people that are having my early morning tea and listening to the radio and news. So she always comes in, “I looked in last night and you were *(pretends to sleep)*”.

I don't think there is any secret about longevity. I think I was just fortunate. My parents were both healthy, my father lived to 85 which, for his generation, is a good age and I'd never known him really be ill. And mother was 89... oh well, she'd had 13 births, ten of us grew up, but I can't say that mother ever looked like a downtrodden woman. But that really brings my story to an end. How is it I've lived to this age? A very happy childhood, never heard my parents quarrel with each other, a happy upbringing, a good marriage, daughters, and a wonderful eldest sister, Cissy, a wonderful, wonderful woman.

CHAPTER 4

ALBERT

Born January 1908



Introduction

Albert is almost certainly the oldest miner alive. He began mining in Leeds in 1922, just after the first general miners' strike of 1921. In 1922 many Yorkshire miners moved to the newer southern Yorkshire mines around Doncaster and Hatfield. Hatfield Main Colliery reached full production in 1921 and this is where Albert found work in late 1922 or early 1923. Within a relatively short space of time he moved to Bebside Colliery North of Newcastle near Blythe. Albert gives his next employment as being at Betteshanger Colliery near Deal in Kent, where he worked until going to Canada in 1929, and then for thirty years from about 1931 to 1961. Betteshanger was the biggest mine in Kent, employing around 1500 miners. The shaft was cut in May 1924 and coal reached in 1927.

Mining was new to Kent in the 1920s and almost all the 1500 miners at Betteshanger came from the Northern coalfields. Many of these men had been blacklisted in their local mines after the 1926 strike and needed to relocate to find work. Betteshanger gained a reputation as being the most militant of the Kent mines. The genteel seaside resort of Deal was overwhelmed by the influx of these "rough and dirty men with unintelligible accents", many of them with families. Albert's claim about the locals displaying signs saying no vacancies for miners is verified by stories and a photograph on the website.

Albert and his daughter Shirley want to acknowledge family who will no doubt enjoy his story: Granddaughter Sheena, Great grandsons Kirt, Wayne and Dean, Great-great-grandsons Kameron and Kian, Great-great-great granddaughter Livy. Albert had a 'lovely' birthday in December 2009 and is now looking forward to his 103th party

Albert's Story

I was born in Scarborough in January 1908. My family moved to Leeds a few years later. When growing up things were different, kiddies never had a pair of trousers on that hadn't been sewn up, things like that and they never had a full school uniform on. They didn't have uniforms like they have today and yet they all loved each other, they helped each other, they never locked the doors then. Children could go anywhere, they were free. And Palm Sunday- that was once a year- that's when you used to get your new clothes if you had any money and they'd go out. All the kids had shiny sleeves; they never had no handkerchief (*all laugh*).

At fourteen I began working in the pit. Yes I started in the Leeds mines in 1922. Well, you see, with living in a village, in a mining village, by the time you were 14, you knew about the pit, you know... and I was looking forward to going down. So it didn't bother me, not really. Well it was it was a bit of a shock at first I suppose, but it's second nature, isn't it, and I got used to the dark and being in a small space. I worked in Leeds for twelve months and then the family moved to Doncaster. I worked at Hatfield Main. Then I came to Deal. I worked at the Betteshanger Colliery until September 1929.

In 1929 I left the mines at Deal to go to Canada. I wanted to get out of the mines, you know, get out of the pit where I'd been for seven years. I went to Hamilton, Ontario. It was a nice ship crossing. We went to Ireland first, picked up a lot of Irish girls, back to Scotland, then straight to Canada. In Quebec the officials dealt with us, wished us good luck and gave us a New Testament. They said that if we looked after ourselves and did well, we'd do alright. I lived with my auntie in Hamilton, 123 Bayswater Street, Ontario.

I got a job first at the wireworks, Greenings Wireworks, a massive works and then did everything, you know, ropes, anything made with wire, farmers needed it, everybody needed it. It's a bit sad, I only lasted a fortnight. You don't want to know what happened, do you? (*Laughs*) well, it's laughable really. You see, I got the job with Greenings Wireworks because there was no work. You had to sign up. There was nothing, you know, no work. And, of course, they all wear belts in the place of work and I still had braces. There was a French-Canadian at work, a little stiff chap and I'd been there a few days, I used to work six till six, 12 hours, an hour off for lunch, for \$15 a week. He pulled my braces like a catapult, you know, but I didn't take any notice first time. But the next time, I swung round to hit him and I missed him, so I just said "I'll see you in the morning". I was getting a bit scared, but anyway, the next morning, I got my card to punch out as I'm going out and he's just behind me. I didn't know what to do, but I thought well I'll have to finish this. I knew in my own mind I had to hit him first. I had to and I did. I beat him up and I got the sack on the Friday. I'd only been working a fortnight.

Then I worked for the City, that's the corporation at Hamilton. There's a mountain we were laying water pipes and as you know, the frost goes very deep, ten or twelve feet. It was rock, we were boring holes, and there was fire in it. But it was a good job and I worked there for about 12 months. Doubled the money I got in the wireworks, \$30 wasn't too bad, you could save a little bit of that. But living in England and in the pits, you got friends all around you, but when you're going to Canada, you've got to make a life of your own, and it's sometimes very difficult. But I did get used to it.

My auntie had a big house, a very big house and she had lots of boarders in, you know, they have one room or two rooms or whatever it was and one of the chaps from Manitoba had come to stay there and we became friends. We decided we'd go to Montreal, so we walked and we got lifts. When we got there, we tried to get on the

docks first to get on the cattle boats. Sometimes they needed young men to look after the cattle. But we couldn't get on the docks at all. Now I'm in 1930, 1931.

We couldn't get work there so we crossed the border into the States, illegally. You see, Wall Street had collapsed in 1929 and prohibition was on at the same time. A lot of people tried to cross the border. There was prohibition and, of course, they built a lot of stills, whisky stills on the Canadian border and they used to cross the border. Men like me filled their pockets with whisky, and tried to get across to sell them. Frightened? Not really, no, I think at that age, you don't feel frightened of anything, do you, really? I was only 20 or 22 see. We crossed at midnight. I remember we waited till midnight to cross and the field was lit up with lighters.

We crossed alright, we got in New York State but the federal police picked us up, caught us and took us back to the border. They took our shoes and stockings off and everything and we were kept as prisoners. The British Consulate Secretary wrote to us and informed us about a trial. We were in Malone prison then, it's in New York State. It was a very old-fashioned prison. It was the time of prohibition. And I saw the turnkey; the man that locks us up is called the turnkey, and he was drunk. We were tried and sentenced to Oswego, that's in New York State.

I didn't mind being in prison. But owing to the number of people crossing the border, there were many men my age, looking for work and adventure, the prison was full. And you couldn't really stomach a winter in Canada. These young men slept under bridges, couldn't get work, and they found their way to the South, the farther they got south, the warmer it was, you see. I did about six weeks in Oswego prison. It was a little prison. My cell was about eight foot by about five feet, a toilet at the end, a bed on the side which swung down like a thin steel bed, that's what we had. And at half

past six in the morning they gave me half a loaf, that's for the day. They sent me to Ellis Island. By then I was on my own.

When I'd done my time in prison, I sailed back home. On the return journey home people didn't know I was a deportee. It was a free passage. Everything was free, you had the good meals every day and nobody knew you were a deportee.

On my return I met and married Edith Toms. There was no work in Leeds so I walked from Leeds to Deal in search of work in the Kent mines. I worked in Betteshanger Colliery in Deal for almost 30 years.

In about 1953 when a van came to the pit to see about your lungs, they found I had pneumomycosis. I had ten per cent. I had lost, Edith, my first wife. Later I met Mollie Methuen and her son Nick. Mollie and I were married, but by then my lungs were worse, 20 percent I was told. Mollie said she did not want me to carry on in the pit. So we started a Fish and Chip shop on Telegraph Road. That's how people around here know me. Mollie also took a small general shop on College Road. Yes my lungs are still a problem, it reached 40 percent.

I've had a good life. I enjoyed working in the pit and that's a thing that's difficult to say. When you work in the pit, nothing else matters outside. We share welfare clothes, mining clothes and we communed together. Miners always stick together. I suppose it is a different world but a world I enjoyed. People can adjust if they try. I've been alright.

There are some clever men in the pits you know. Bevan was a clever man and there's one Welsh chap called 'Leicester Magnus' who was labour and used to speak in

different villages. Well the shaft might be about five foot high and sometimes... we had wooden props in them days, and sometimes when the weight came down, it would crack the timber and break. We'd be putting new ones up to try to save it from falling in. Well Magnus was working this day with me, there were about 20 of us on this face. You could see that the weight was bad, so we all walked off the face to a safer place. But the next morning, the manager came down the pit and he said "who's the men then that walked off this face?" He was in a bad mood. So Magnus said "I'm the one that come off the face, but I've not come here to be on your roll of honour" or something, He got a better job, he was too clever for the manager.

It was bad years ago in the mines, especially up North because the pits are not deep there, they're shallow, they only might be about a hundred yards deep. Whereas these pits here in Deal, they're a hell of a depth. Years ago, the engineer at the pit looked after the ropes and everything; saw to it that they were in good condition for winding. They had the number one pit ready and going and they put a big steel cage on. And the other shaft, it had a big massive engine and the thick ropes but only a light cage, a very light cage. To make it steady, they've got four ropes, at each corner of the cage there'd be a straight rope that goes right to the shaft bottom and they tie it so the cage can't move and it was hung there. And they get into the cage each time and then one of the ropes on the side sloughed. Do you know what that means? The wires got caged up, the wires broke and the cage was only light, it wasn't a small cage, not like the others. And it sloughed and gradually there was that much wire in strands that it stopped the cage. But as the rope is a new one and heavy, the engine driver didn't notice it. So he went down. And it stopped at the top of this cage and it got so heavy that it broke and he went down in the cage, the engineer. He died.

There have been lots of accidents in mines. Years ago in Newcastle and these pits, they only had one shaft, and if there was an explosion in the pit, everybody was killed and the village was wiped out, it's terrible.

Miners are always friendly and we all help each other. I was already working in the fish and chip shop for miner's strike in 1986. My neighbour was still working in the pit. We left him a food parcel outside his door. I'll never forget. I don't know whether he liked it or not but it was a good gesture on our part. I tried keeping contact with my mining friends when I could but in a fish and chip shop, you've not much time because you're working every evening, except I used to close on a Monday because you couldn't get fresh fish on a Monday. I think the miners have been my best friends.

Miners seem to be different from other people because when they first came to Deal in 1929, they were shunned. Deal people didn't want them, no. They couldn't even get a house or lodgings; it would say on the door 'no miners need apply'. We were a different class of people. Yes miners were classed as something uncouth. They didn't think much of miners because until then there are no pits in Kent. I felt uncomfortable when I first came to Deal. But then they realised that miners helped the economy because they lived on fish. Miners have to have good food to work in the pits and if they had the money, they'd buy beef and meat. You learn a lesson from that though, don't you? At six o'clock in the morning we would walk down the street to the bus. We used to wear clogs. But these clogs were very noisy and it annoyed the neighbours which didn't help us to be liked.

Living in Deal, someone shouts "hello Albert" and I'll think about it, and then when he's gone about 50 yards, I can remember his name, (*laughs*). I've lived here since 1986. We lived up Mill Hill in the fish and chip shop and the other little business but when Mollie got old and she was going blind, we moved down here to be near the

centre of the town for the buses and things like that. So she enjoyed her life here. When I stopped work it was difficult for a while, because it's a 24-hour job nearly, you've got to get up in the morning, your fish comes, you've got to clean it, cut it and everything, then you've got your potatoes and all them to do. But if you're happy at your work, it doesn't make difference does it, you just do it.

Life is what you make it. My advice to others is just to try to look after yourself. About stress, I think dealing with it is about the way you live. I think if you can't change it and alter it, don't worry about it. I think it's nice to try to be good and kind to everybody, you know, you don't want to have enemies.

Is there a secret to life? No, I think it's in your genes and family background. On my mother's side did we have good genes, but on my father's side we didn't. I had two sisters, Elsie and Mary. They didn't do so bad, both lived into the late 80s.

I have danced all of my life. I liked modern sequence dancing. I still go every Thursday night, just locally, because all my friends are there. I've done exercises all my life. Recently I learned Tai Chi. I was 101 when I stopped.

I've been all over, Vancouver twice, Egypt, you mention it and I've been there. We used to go for a month at a time. You can close a fish shop because you've nothing on the shelves. We used to shut the fish shop for a month and go on holiday. I've always booked a holiday a year in front. It is important to have something to look forward to. I like going to Malta, and I'll go again in January because my son is there but the best place for me is Vancouver. It's like going into a new world, everything seems new, it's marvellous and there's a lovely park there you know, and everything they do is in a big way, do you know what I mean? It's different, it's nice.

Important to me today are friends, good friends. A good friend is a very important one because you can't do without friends really. If you've got a good friend, you should be happy. I have a good relationship with both my children, John who lives in Malta and Shirley who lives in Southampton. At the moment Shirley lives in Deal with me and I enjoy her company.

After porridge in the morning, we (Albert and his daughter) go for a walk on seafront in the morning, then for a cup of tea and a piece of toast and then to 'the Centre' (Age Concern Centre) where lunch and dinner are provided. I have lots of friends at the centre and I go there most days except Saturday and Sunday.

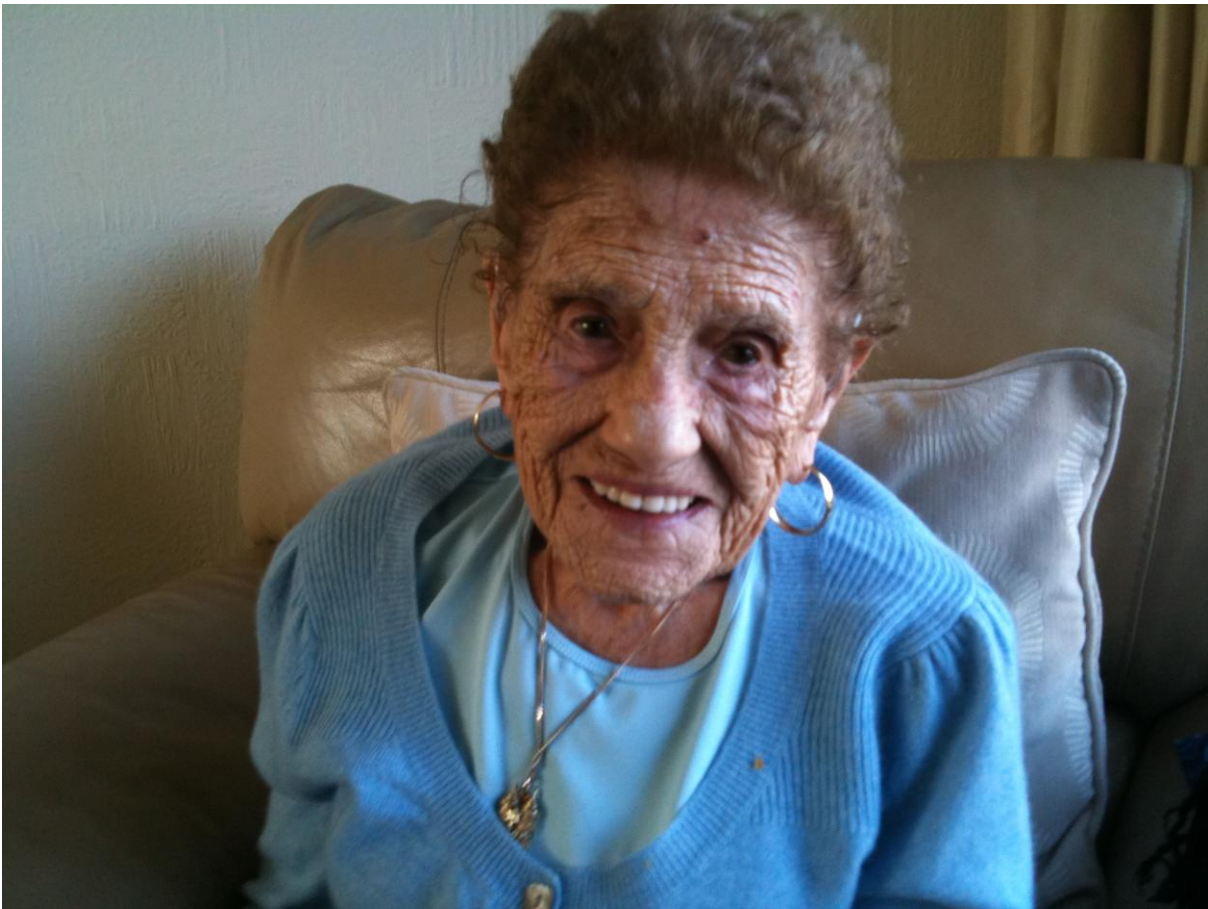
One hundred balloons festooned the roof of the Aged Concern Centre at Deal on my 100th birthday. They 'made a cake and everything'. Another celebration followed with my family who hosted a party for about 50 people; family and friends.

I've had a good life. I am the oldest in a line of five generations. I am a great-great granddad. I don't think of the bad times, you've got to think of the good times. Yes I'm happy thinking about the good times.

CHAPTER 5

NITA

Born March 1908



Introduction

On the day I (Tina) interviewed Nita in Bury, a town just north of Manchester, a brilliant blue February winter sky set the tone for our discussion. I had met Nita two months earlier. At that time she has been recovering from a medical crisis for which she had been hospitalized. I could see that she had made progress in her recovery; she had put on some weight and her eyes were no longer darkly circled. We were no longer strangers and she said she felt more at ease with me. Although I suggested she start talking about her first twenty years, she had another starting point in mind, demonstrating her determination to tell her story in her way. She began by talking about the worst time in her life, this last year.

Until that illness in July 2009 Nita had been swimming and dancing and cooking for herself. She had been living alone in her own ground floor flat in Manchester. She explained that she had an active social life as part of a local Jewish community, and had frequented her club three times a week.

Nita is currently living with her daughter Hilary in Bury and travels to London to stay with her other daughter Renee. She still hankers for her lost independence.

Nita's story

I'll be 102 in March but the hardest year of my life was this year. I used to go swimming once a week, I always swam with my head above the water. Well, when I was in full strength I used to do about 14 or 15 lengths, but as I started getting older, I did eight or nine and then as I got over 100 and I reached 101, I started not doing the length but doing breadth. I used to grumble to the lady that watches over the water and say to her, "Oh, I'm a waste of time coming", and she said, "no, you're not, - there's younger people than you here and they don't do as much as you. Keep on trying." I swam until I had this last illness.

I used to love swimming and messing about in the water. I used to go to the centre for old people. We had a mixed crowd, men and women. And we used to have such fun. And there was one man that used to love to tease me and he used to grab hold of my feet in the water. But then, unfortunately, he got pneumonia. He was a lovely strong man but he went very quickly. And so I missed him for a long time. I don't know how many people come up to me now, but they want to shake my hand because they used to swim with me, or they used to dance with me. And everybody knew me, yes everybody, all the swimmers. The one thing about swimming is you don't think of outside things, you just think of your swimming and you enjoy it. And the more you do, the more you want to do. I used to come out and feel so good. I've not been back to the centre for three months now but I thought I would go again. I may not swim but I will go and get in the water and mess about like I used to do.

I also used to love dancing. I became interested through my brother who was three years older than me. He was going to a special dance one night and they said you could bring somebody. I read his invitation card, so I said to him... my brother's name was Hymie ... I said "Hymie, why don't you take me with you?" "Go away", he said,

“...you’re only a kid, you can’t dance” I said “no, but I will learn, I know I’ll be a good dancer.” And I pestered him so much that he said to our mother, “has she got anything to wear for a dance?” My mother said “no, but if you want to take her ...” and she took me to a dressmaker, local, and she made me a red velvet dress. And it had a cowl collar, you know, the loose collars, a little bit of your shoulder showing. I was 14 actually, going on for 15. And he took me with a load of friends, and said to them, “I want you to have one dance with her, every one of you, I want you to make her a wonderful night and if you don’t, I’ll be really annoyed with you.” So each boy took me for a dance, I was dancing all night and I loved it. Every one of them said “oh, you are light; you’re as light as a feather.” And that’s how I learnt to dance.

We lived in the middle of the street and on the corner was a dance place called Finnigans. They used to teach dancing there, and I drove my mother mad to let me go. I started going there and I became their best dancer and I even taught dancing to other children. I got very friendly with a girl who was a very good dancer and we decided one evening that we’d go early to a dance not very far away so that my parents wouldn’t know we had not gone to the pictures. And that’s how I started dancing, going dancing instead of going to the pictures. I used to try and get to know beforehand what was on at the pictures in case my mother asked me. At the Plaza they wanted me to become a teacher but my father wouldn’t let me. He said, “you’re not coming home at 11 o’clock, 12 o’clock at night, no”. So I didn’t become a dance professional, but I could have been. I always remember the girls saying “oh, Nita...” well, I was not Nita Bowman then, I was Nita Simons. “Nita Simons is here, we’ve got no chance with the fellas”, and they didn’t. I was booked up from dance to dance.

Until last year I went dancing once a week in the centre. If there was a man, which is very unlikely, there are always a lot of women, but if there was a man who could dance, he found me and he wouldn’t leave me all night. Nobody else got a chance to

dance with me. So I was very popular for dancing, I danced all of my life until last year.

Joe, my husband, did not dance and that was one of those things. I had made up my mind that I wouldn't dance with a man that wore glasses, I wouldn't dance with a man that bit his nails and definitely wouldn't dance with a fella that didn't dance. Well, glasses I couldn't do anything about, but I stopped him biting his nails, - I said, "if I catch you biting your nails, I won't go out with you anymore". I threatened him all the time we were going out together, but he was so kind.

Joe met me the year my mother died, God rest her soul, and she was such a wonderful mother. When you went out, she'd know where you were, she'd wait up till you came home. She always had a cup of cocoa waiting before going to bed, and that's how she was until she died. I was one of five: Mary was the oldest, then Hymie and me. Then there was Eddie, and Leah as the fifth. My mother died at 49. After Hymie was born, she was told not to have any more children because she'd strained her heart.

When she died it broke my heart. I cried and cried till I could not see out of my eyes. I'd never had anything wrong with my eyes before. And from then on, I started suffering with my eyes, something wrong every year or every two years. So that was the year I met my husband. When my mother died, we sat nine months in mourning... we'd go about our daily work but we don't go to theatres and dance, you know, you mourn. So I was mourning, I didn't go dancing, I didn't go to the pictures, all I did was go on walks to Heaton Park. We lived right near Heaton Park. Joe used to come for me at night and stand outside the door and I used to see him from the house and come out to him and say, "what are you doing here?" He said, "well, I'm a bit nervous

to come and ask you, would you like to come out and walk, but now you've come out, can I ask you?"

I used to go walking with him every night for those nine months and he was so nice that I thought what am I thinking about these boys that go dancing, all they think about is dancing and they don't think any further. And me, as a girl, you know, you think of the future. So I decided if he's got enough money to buy me the ring I want, I'll marry him. I wanted a ring like my sister... my brother had got engaged the year before and I saw that ring too and it was beautiful. And I decided about the ring I wanted and we started saving, the two of us. He got that ring that I wanted. I've since lost it. Anyway, we got engaged.

My husband had just come out of university. He had been learning to be a doctor. But he was one of eight children from a poor family and his father could hardly earn for two so he had to work. I never got on with Joe's father. So there's my poor mother-in-law, she had to work very, very hard, day and night. Joe's father was a gent's tailor and he used to make things for a big firm.. They were very generous with left over materials which they gave him. And so he'd have a little trouser length or a little skirt length or even enough to make a blouse from the lining, satin linings, because they were very, very good suits. So all day she was with the children and all night she went round to theatres, selling these things made from off cuts. All the working staff would come from poor families in those days. Remember, it was only 1920s. Anyway, Joe's mother met Gracie Fields he made Gracie Fields a costume. She even came to the house, I saw her myself. And that's how his mother went on to sell things made from off cuts to earn a few extra shillings for the next day. That's how she was. But she was a wonderful mother, a lovely cook; she worked so hard out of nothing. I always remember how out of a tin of sardines, she opened the tin, took the sardine bones out, mashed up the fish, boiled a little potato, mashed it with it, made a big dough out of it

and put onions in with it, little bits of onion, pepper and salt and it was delicious. And we had it on bread and it was like a piece of cake, she made things so nicely. She spread it out for eight of us, dash eight of us! They were all very nice; I got on marvellously with my husband's family except Joe's father, however, I never got on with.

After my mother died, my father was a father and mother and he was a wonderful father. He used to bring me a cup of tea in bed and then I'd get up and wash my hands and he'd give me a bit of breakfast, a bagel, those days, bagels were a big treat, today they're nothing. We got engaged and then my father went to tell him that we would like to get married a year later 'cos my brother was already married and I was copying my brother in everything he did. My mother-in-law said "I have no objections to Nita, she's a nice girl and a good girl and I've not objections." My father-in-law turned round and said, "I won't consent to it till Ginny..." that was my husband's eldest sister "is married as Joe is younger". My mother-in-law said "take no notice he will be at the wedding, don't worry, give me a date and tell me." So we decided for the 12th of September 1933.

Unfortunately, the year after I got engaged, my father had a stroke. His big factory had been a very good business with 30 workers. I was 25 when my brother took over the business after my father took ill. But business went to nothing and because my brother was running the business, there was no money to give me for the wedding. So Joe and I saved up that following year to get married. We paid for the wedding and you wouldn't believe it, we had a full chicken dinner, a seven course meal. We had hors d'oeuvres of smoked salmon and chopped liver followed by chicken soup. Roast chicken, roast potatoes, all the trimmings and vegetables that go with it, and different salads. Then we had potato pudding and drinks, loads of drinks were on the table. Then we had lemon tea, no milk, lemon tea and that was it. And then in the evening, -

we had the reception before the dinner - they came round with latkes, little latkes, and vol-au-vent with liver and mushrooms. The dinner started at three o'clock and it went till twelve, yes. Cheatham Assembly Rooms was the poshest place you could book those days, and we left there at twelve. We paid for it all, my husband and I. That dinner and everything with it cost 39 pounds. And I had about 85 or 90 friends and family. Yes, 39 pounds for the whole dinner, I've still got the menu. It was the most gorgeous day on the 12th of September.

So we got married with my father like that, with his face on the side from the stroke and not doing very much. He couldn't move and couldn't talk and I stayed home with him even after I was married, to look after him. That was that.

Joe and I had met at work: my husband, not having a trade, had to learn something. So his father put him to learn tailoring. He gave him a thimble on his finger and a needle. The first stitch my husband made, the thimble flew in the air and he said, "oh, I can't do that, how can I?" so he wouldn't do it anymore. Then his father found a very good gent's machinist and asked him would he take Joe on. Well, those days, if you took people to teach them, you paid for it. So this machinist said no: "I can't afford to take somebody on and not get paid". Eventually he found a job with a lady tailor and started work at the sewing machine. I was already working there. When he first sat down on the machine, he saw me and I was having a row with the manager. I was saying to the manager "well, if you don't like it, you know what you can do with me, sack me!" This must have impressed Joe because he told me years later, 'oh I wouldn't like to be married to that mouth': when I was telling him off one day, he said "I know I should have known that, I heard you in the workshop." I said, "What are you talking about?" so he told me that first memory. Anyway, and that was that, and we were going together then. He came to work at the shop with me and every Friday, we used to get our wages. The other workers got the scissors and used to bang on the

machines ‘to the bank, to the bank, to the bank’ for me and him, you know we were saving for the wedding, we knew it was all in fun.

My father had already passed on and my single sister Leah, my husband and I were still living in the house. One day Leah met this man at a dance. He came up to me and said, “Can I take your sister home?” I knew the family, so I said “okay, you can take her home,” and he made an appointment to see her again. Then she decided she wanted to get married. I think I was married several years, we were alright, all lived together, and then after a couple of years, she had a baby. And he was a lovely, lovely little boy, a clever boy, very clever, he’s now retired. Anyway, he got the whooping cough as a baby and he was very bad. Then I found out I was pregnant.

I had been married for eleven years and in our 12th year together; we had a baby, Renee. But my sister’s son had the whooping cough and I didn’t want Renee to get it, so we moved out into our own home. I stayed in my house at Southbrook Avenue, Manchester, for 32 years. It was a beautiful home. But Renee had me up day and night and I was running every week to the clinic, the baby’s surgery, and every week to have sunray treatment on her chest. I decided, after my first baby, never again. When I knew I was pregnant with the second, I didn’t want her, oh, I didn’t want her, I tried everything...Until I landed in the hospital and then they said to me, “you’re well pregnant and if you are not careful, you’re going to have a miscarriage and you’re going to be very ill with it.” They kept me in hospital till I was able to hold it, then I came out and they said “you’ve got to live very carefully.” Well, from then on, I knew I was going to have her. But Hilary was a marvellous baby, good as gold -she was so different to the first.

And now, in my later years, I'm living like a queen; my daughters won't let me do anything. I want to go home to my own home in Manchester... I've been in Bury for a long time. I used to do a lot more than I do now. If I was in my own home, I know where things are and they're right where I can get to. But they say "you're not ready yet, you're not fit yet." You see, I've not been able to walk well. I was very weak when I came here last year. I'm a determined person and a strong character. I say to my children, you can't boss me you know, don't treat me like a baby; you forget that I'm your mother.

And my eyes will never... I used to have the most beautiful eyes, they used to say, 'your eyes are arresting', that's the thing, but never mind, I'm happy to be... I say thank god for every day that I wake up because when it's my time, I want to go without knowing I'm gone. And there you are, that's me, that's me, and I've got such a lot of friends, like my daughters, I've got loads and loads of friends, they were all waiting for me to come back to the centre, you know. I've been going there for 21 years. But, I'm very happy as I am, I've got nothing to worry about, no commercial worries and no money worries. Yes, I'd like to be able to see a little bit better and hear a little bit better. I'd manage if I had those two things; I'd be able to live a bit better.

If you can manage and you've not got pain, you've got to try and push worry away and not be miserable. Try to be happy and try and join in every day with what's going on. Worry kills you, so if you have it, push it away and forget it. Think about being thankful to be alive. I say, thank God. I do worry, I can worry myself to death in the day and then on coming to bed I think, 'forget it Nita', and I talk to myself, you've got to do that. But I do that talking on my own as I don't want them to think I'm daft.

CHAPTER 6

ALISON

Born April 1907



Introduction

Alison was born in Edinburgh and after a short period in Perth has lived in Leith since 1935. She moved there with her husband from Perth. Her parents lived round the corner and were able to help when the children came along. She explained to me (Pam) that there was a great difference between Edinburgh and Leith. Before the Second World War they were two separate towns. Alison said you would know which town you were in by the men's hats. In Edinburgh they wore bowlers or even tall hats whereas in Leith they wore flat caps. It was the difference between the managers and the workers. Alison is a graduate of the Edinburgh College of Art, where she met her husband William, also an artist. The College was founded the same year Alison was born in 1907. As Alison told me she has always been mad about art. She remembers the Russian Ballet coming to Edinburgh in 1928 and it was the drawing as well as the dancing she found so wonderful. On my second visit she showed me a beautiful book which she had recently been given, full of fine prints and designs of the ballet and their famous director Diaghilev. She is still inspired by his work. After the Second World War Alison returned to the College to study glass engraving. She found she loved it. A Scottish Crafts Centre was opened in 1948 under the direction of another inspiring East European, the Polish Count, Tarnowski, whose wide knowledge of art ensured the centre's success. Alison referred to a recent article about him in the Times Newspaper. When Alison first started engraving she sent her work to the centre. She liked to be inventive and every commission was different. By the time the centre closed she had built up her clientele.

When I visited Alison to collect the edited version of the story we had afternoon tea together. Alison had prepared sandwiches for me and we enjoyed chocolate cake and biscuits. We sat in full view of two of her husband's beautiful paintings. I enjoyed Alison's company and I so much appreciated the time she gave me to tell her inspiring story.

Alison's Story

I was born in Edinburgh in 1907. My parents were both from Edinburgh. I had a little brother who died when I was four and he was a year and a half, he died of meningitis and I think mother was devastated. I remember crying when they told me little Donald had died but I think a child can accept things more readily up to a point. I just accepted life after that.

My parents didn't have any more children so I was an only child, and my goodness I was spoiled, but I took it for granted. I didn't appreciate the fact that I got more than the average, but it was there, why not?

When I was at school, the only subject that was of any interest was art, and I'd read anything possible but, of course, there weren't the magazines in those days there are now. I was always interested in art, that was the one subject I was mad about. So I had to see the work of artists in the papers, not always coloured, sort of black and white, and the fact that they were artists, I fell in love with them, didn't know anything about them personally, just their work. I saw Augustus John's paintings in a magazine. Now Augustus John I found tremendously interesting because he was an artist, and an artist to me is perfect, doesn't matter what sort of life they lead.

When I was young I felt that it must be heaven to marry an artist. Earlier I had learned about a girl at school who'd been brilliant and she had won a scholarship out of the whole of Britain and went to Cambridge, which was a bombshell in those days for a woman to reach that height. The school was given a holiday for one day and we all knew about this girl who brought honour to the Edinburgh school. A son of Augustus John was at the College, and Augustus John was sacred and the son of course was equally sacred and he married this brilliant girl.

I think I admired the artist's creative instinct. Artists could bring things to life that the average person would never have thought of. I think I had inherited that through my mother whose father had been a glass engraver. Now, I didn't know that at the time until years later. I never met him, he was dead before I arrived I think, but I'd loved to have met him. Mother was interested in art, although she didn't know all that much about it in those days, but sufficiently interested to persuade my father to let me go to Art College.

In 1928, I think it was, the Russian Ballet came to Edinburgh and it was absolutely wonderful. Apart from the dancing, the drawings were superb - the whole thing was a bombshell. We hadn't anything like it in Britain and it was so overwhelming, we couldn't applaud, it was beyond applause. And I remember Diaghilev, seeing him in Art College in Edinburgh and he was waiting for somebody. I could visualise him, and he had an Astrakhan collar on his coat and you know, even then, he was a personality, standing alone but a personality, a director, of the ballet. But it's curious how a man can appear to do nothing and yet you're aware he's got a presence. He was the catalyst of the troop.

Women's Rights were very important at that time. Art College was a sort of gap where a lot of people leaving school, between school and marriage, they'd go to Art College. Because they didn't have the exams as at university and it was a sort of playground in a way, if you wanted to live that way, of course, like anything else, you can take your art very seriously. But a lot of the women were just filling a gap between school and marriage.

While I was at Art College I fell in love with one of the artists and married in 1931. My husband came from Edinburgh also. His grandfather had come from Germany at a time when there were a lot of people wandering around Europe from various countries and he met a Scottish girl and settled down in Edinburgh. Everything's been very

smooth. I always found an artist interesting, No other profession was comparable in my mind.

I think going to Art College and meeting my husband there, was the main point in my life. I was in my 20s at that time and life was just... very happy. I fell for him and I made him fall for me, it's been a very happy marriage. We have a lot in common, that's essential. I think some people just marry because they like the look of each other, but it doesn't always work out that they've got much in common apart from that. We were both interested in art, but it's a bit of luck whom you meet.

We lived in Perth when we married and my husband worked in art at Perth Academy. We came to this house (in Edinburgh) in 1935, so we're the oldest people in the Avenue. When the family came the bedrooms were full. We used one room as a dining room and above that was the sitting room. There was never enough room for my husband to paint, he would occasionally squeeze in some place, but he didn't have a studio and that, to an artist, is a disaster. He was very generous to me, he engineered that I got an engraving lathe, which is a big job to get some machinery from Germany, but he arranged all that, everything was just arranged for me. And I felt he'd never got enough chance to do his own painting, that's my one regret.

With three children you were never at peace to do anything, although I shouldn't say that because I had my glass engraving. I didn't have to go out for a job - I could work at home - I didn't have to go out of the house, which made things easier. Sometimes when I was trying to engrave, concentrating on some terribly important thing, a child would crawl up my back (*both laugh*), it was just part of life. But it was fun. The only thing I notice with people who don't have a family, they'll say "now, what do you do with your spare time?" But there's no spare time with a family.

It's a rather complicated story about starting glass engraving. There was a very interesting person at Art College, she was also interested in glass, had gone to Germany to find out more about engraving and an enormous variety of things you could do. She was in Germany for a year, then the War broke out and she had to come back to Britain. She started a glass course at Edinburgh Art College. Our ration books were issued from the Art College, it was a centre I suppose that's not too busy a place. And when I went back to get my ration book, I met all the friends that I'd left for the family, and I thought I must get back, so I thought I'd like to splash about in colour, however, the man in charge of the glass department said "well why not try glass engraving" and I said "no, I want colour." So he said "well try it one day." So it would have been awfully rude if I hadn't tried engraving. It was just right up my street, pure luck. I've gone through life with luck.

You've got to have a remarkably steady hand, unbelievably steady, because if you make a mistake, you can't rub out on glass. This glass stopper with the letter 'A' on it was part of a decanter. The decanter broke. Somehow it had been at an open window and the wind had blown it over. So I had to start all over again which probably took about four or five hours. I gave up engraving when I was in my 90s because I no longer had control of my hands. I can still draw Christmas cards. I've always liked drawing, even as a child, I was always drawing.

Other people have learned glass engraving and they get into a business and they churn out the same thing over and over and over, whereas my every commission was different. Now this is where my luck comes in. People would discuss with me what they wanted and sometimes I would send drawings of ideas but looking back, it was pure luck. I've known people who were glass engravers and they looked out for a job and it was awfully difficult, if you want to start on your own, you need a certain finance to cover you for the first year or so till you become accepted. And some people would take a job to tide them over and if it was a job of glass engraving, it was

repeat and repeat and repeat, do 50 of the one thing. Well that would kill me. I remember (*laughs*) a man connected with airplanes and I engraved a little airplane on a glass and he was awfully taken with it, he said “oh, I’d like 50 of those” I just said “no, I can’t.” To do two would be bad enough, to do five would be pure hell, and to do 50, I’d be round the bend. So I had plenty of other commissions, I said “no, I can’t.” Looking back, I couldn’t have done it. I’d rather invent something that I could produce myself and send it in to a craft centre.

A centre for Scottish crafts opened in ‘48 which covered everything, bookbinding, all sorts of... pottery, printing, everything like that. Glass engraving was just one that was included with the other things. And it was very interesting the number of craftsmen who were employed by the centre. They had exhibitions in an old house in High Street, opposite John Knox’s Church, called Acheson House. It was backed by a lot of influential people interested in Scottish crafts, well to do people, and they launched the craft centre.

The Scottish craft centre employed a Polish Count Tarnowski as Director and he had such knowledge of art generally that he really launched this place. He was steeped in art and he could not have been better, his appreciation was so wide. And the craft centre just flourished, people came... and also his social attitude attracted people to the place. Then after he died, they didn’t get anybody of the same calibre and it just faded out, but by this time I’d got my clientele.

The Poles were very popular, I think foreigners are always interesting, a lot were artists or interested in art. Now, the average Scotsman was not so interested in art at that time, but I think continental people were. A lot depends on the crowd of people you happen to land with; you get the impression that such is the case. The Poles had nice manners and a Scotsman hasn’t got the flow of gentlemanly qualities, they treat

their women differently. A Pole would kiss a lady's hand very gracefully, now a Scotsman that was just not done, it was their difference.

I think quite a lot of Poles settled in Britain and some of them married and it's worked out quite happily, I haven't heard of any disasters. I think the disasters happened (*laughs*) when women were able to support themselves, no problem financially; they could just walk out of a marriage. But prior to that, a woman couldn't walk out, she had no money, so in that sense, things have altered for women.

Women's rights took a firm hold after the war, of course, the women had been working during the war and they didn't like being out of a job when the men came back. It's amazing how things do occur entirely due to circumstances. There must have been a lot of unrest. It was important to let the population realise that women were being unfairly treated, but in that sense, they're still fighting, of course, for equal pay. I don't know what the answer to that is. If you're married, I suppose it's quite nice to have a job. I had my job with engraving but people just want to go into whatever business they're interested in.

In the 1940s there was rationing. We used to buy white bread as brown bread hadn't come into fashion at that time. You'd take the loaf and put the knife and try to slice it and it was as if it was made of rubber, it never held together as a loaf does now. We used to laugh about that wartime bread.

Going back to the First World War, I was only seven, I was born in 1907, there weren't the newspapers and we never knew exactly what was happening. And people would go about with long faces and I think they had learned somewhere perhaps 20,000 of our troops had been killed in one day. Well, I didn't know anything about that and it was the silence and lack of news through the newspapers, I suppose they wouldn't want to alarm the public too much. So that was all a bit of a mystery.

My husband was slightly older than I was, he was in the First World War and because he could draw, he was put onto maps, drawing maps, for a long time and they have to work in artificial light and he had a problem at that time with his eyes, constantly working under artificial light, doing very fine map scenes. After the War, he eventually got a job teaching art in Moray House Training College, he enjoyed that very much, and then he retired and was bored stiff and died within a year...

In 1963 my husband died, yes (*long pause*). But you know, people often say “didn’t you miss him?” but actually I didn’t because he was always there, always there, and people can’t believe that. Yes, even now and people don’t understand that and I can understand why they don’t. It sounds impossible but the reason it has continued is because we had so much in common. I don’t know if you’ve ever come across that before. Well, I remember my daughter-in-law, after my husband died, I didn’t weep and she would look at me and wonder did I not realise what had happened? And she said something about it and I said, “but he’s always there, he’s never gone,” and she couldn’t understand that. It seems a long time but there’s always been plenty to do and the family are busy, it’s amazing how time passes (*long pause*). Fortunately I could stay on in this house, which is awfully good. I’ve had awfully good neighbours all the time and we’ve all got on.

There have been a lot of changes. The children could play in the street when they were growing up but now you can’t; there are too many cars. My children are married and I’m a great-grandmother now.

People are tremendously kind. I’ve got more time to look around in this so called “retired life”. You see, when I was engraving, it was the family and engraving, I’d very little time to look around; I had my friends, but beyond that, I was limited. And

now that I'm on my own, there's a lot of kindness around, surprising, I'd been too busy to notice the kindness previously so maybe it's always been there.

Socially, I'm taken out now. I don't go out myself. I can't walk, I'm too wobbly, but I run about the house. I've got an awfully good help at the moment. And my goodness, she's just perfect. She comes just once a week and then I have somebody who comes every second evening to cook my evening meal. They're all nice, easy to get on with, that's awfully important. I've been awfully lucky, they were all nice.

I can't speak too highly of the National Health Service. I'm not often ill, I've had flu, although it's an awful muddle getting through to the doctor. Certain parts of the day you have to phone some other number, quite beyond me, now that's the sort of thing where I've found old age an awful nuisance. I can't understand all the rules and regulations that have altered within the last few days, so my daughter-in-law came down, phoned up this morning and got right through. This is the result: I have my prescriptions delivered to the door.

After I became a widow I travelled a lot with a friend who was at Art College with me and her marriage hadn't worked out awfully well, so there was no compunction about leaving him. And we did quite a lot of travelling together, America, Spain, did a lot of Spain and we actually took the trouble to learn Spanish. I've forgotten it all now, but it was fun, and we had a lot in common. Then she died about two years ago, so I still go on.

I've been to China, India, America and really Europe, quite a lot of Europe. I would like to do the West of Scotland sometime. I found China just fascinating, the scenery, the people, they're so nice. I went to Hong Kong and then into China and the people are so polite, they speak quietly and you go into a shop and the women were small compared to us. I went with an Art College friend, we seemed to be a great lump,

carhorse people and the Chinese ladies were so delicate and soft voices and we felt like a pair of... just coarse people in comparison (*laughs*). We were rather amused, we went into a shop and the people who were serving had been having their mug of tea and if you went up, they would immediately put the mug on the shelf under the counter. Of course, we were dying to know what was on the shelf. They were all so ladylike and here were we rough women wanting to know this and everything, so it was rather amusing. And they were so polite; they could teach us a lot.

Living to be a 100 wasn't my idea (*laughs*). I've just enjoyed life and go on enjoying it. I celebrated my 100th birthday with a big lunch party for friends and family. I've been awfully fortunate with friends and relatives and I don't ever remember a quarrel with anybody. Maybe as a child I'd be irritated, but I never quarrelled with anybody. And life's been very pleasant, no planning on my part.

I just accept what comes. I have no secret that I'm aware of, it's just luck. I've got a nice family, they're all clever, so that's a bit of luck because you don't know what genes you're going to pass on. They've all worked out very happily and (*laughs*) I've enjoyed life and it's all worked out very happily for me. If it's possible, follow the career you like best but of course, it isn't everybody who can, but I was lucky. I think if you're interested in a particular subject that you're fairly good at, and manage to continue with that, that is very satisfying.

Good friends, they're very important and good relationships, so it's all been very smooth. You can't analyse yourself. I think it's impossible to analyse yourself, it's better to listen to what people think of you but they don't always tell you, they're probably too polite (*laughs*). I never had anybody hypocritical, you read about some people who have the most awful quarrels but fortunately, I didn't have that. The only thing is my friends have all died. A lot of them, well my Art College friends have all died off.

I'm still interested in exhibitions, I don't always have the energy in my legs to go around, but I read articles about them, and of course, on television, that's always important.

I'm perfectly happy to go on as I am, I'm not wishing for anything and I'm glad I've got good health, that's an enormous thing. I've just enjoyed life; I haven't any other recipe at all. I can't say any one thing is important, but if you're keen to do a thing, get on with it and if your work is acceptable, be jolly glad. Yes, I've been very grateful. It's luck, because I didn't do anything about it, I've just enjoyed life.

CHAPTER 7

MEG

Born August 1906



Introduction

Meg was born in Dundee and came with her family to Glasgow just before the First World War. She met her husband Willie there and they waited fourteen years before they got married. They enjoyed those intervening years going on long hikes and enjoying the countryside. They had a very happy marriage and the gift of three children, Don, Margaret and Bill.

Meg described the rationing and the hard times experienced in Glasgow during the Second World War. She and her family had a near escape when a bomb fell on the local school, just across the street from their home. But Meg also emphasised the happy times they had and their determination to overcome the setbacks. I (Pam) was inspired by Meg's sense of community as she described to me the importance of 'the close' where she had lived as a child in the Glasgow tenements. Neighbours would share their 'jeely pieces' (jam sandwiches) with each other.

Meg now lives in the Bield Housing Association residential home where she continues to be very much involved in the world and sees her family regularly. Her visitors include her son, Don, daughter in law Sandra, her granddaughter Donna and great granddaughter.

Meg read the article about our UK Centenarian study in the newspaper. What first caught her attention was that she noticed one of the researchers, Pam Smith, shared the same name as her granddaughter. Meg cut the article out and asked her son Don to contact Pam by e-mail. When Pam met Meg at the beginning of February 2010 she quickly realised why Meg was interested to talk to her. Not only did Meg have an interesting story to tell and a formidable memory but she also drew on a diary and scrap book of memories in which she recorded notable events, people, articles and objects that had been important to her. Meg was surrounded by beautiful photographs

of her family recording their past and present history. Another reason why Pam thought Meg may have been interested to follow up the newspaper article was that she was no stranger to the press. Not only was she an avid reader she also regularly wrote letters to the newspaper. These letters covered observations from daily life like the time Meg described the tradition of people washing their stairs so that 'the outside looked as nice as the inside' and a letter in which she stood up for people who got poor wages rather than the recognition they deserved for their hard work. Meg also writes poetry.

Meg told me how she never thinks of her age and in some ways feels younger now than she did when she was in her fifties. She still likes to go to her weekly bingo group and is a keen scrabble player. Meg looks forward to her next birthday in August, and she described herself as the seventh child born on the seventh day. I agree this must mean she is special.

Meg's story

Well, I must say, I've always been happy in my life, I've had quite a lot of setbacks but got over them well, I've got that type of nature. I was born in Dundee and I'm one of ten of a family. Well, there was Liz and Tilda and Andrew and Jack and Nell and Bill and then me. So that made me the seventh child. The younger ones were Jim and Annie and Jess. I'm the last, the longest living. Oh, we were a happy family. It never dawned on me till I was counting one day, and people would say "where were you in the family?" and I used to say "oh, middling," that I was the seventh child, born on the seventh, and I've always wondered if that meant anything.

Well, I can remember where we lived and it had an unusual name: Brown Constable Street. And you know how we have tenement buildings, well we were low down in the tenement building, had our own front door, it was lovely, really nice. On my Dad's side were farming people and he was brought up on a farm. And we lived quite a lot down at my granddad's house. It was just nine miles from Dundee, in Monikie. We used to go on our holidays there. Nothing in it, no entertainment; and we just made our own. I remember we used to play at quoits with my Uncle Andrew. At his lunch-hour, we would get the rings out and play. It was good. And I had a brother who drew and another one who made up poetry and an uncle who was a great singer, a tenor. He would really have been in television if he'd lived at a different age. My Dad used to play his bagpipes there on the farm. It was beautiful out in the open, listening to him. You heard it for miles around.

My gran and grandfather, they both lived till they were 90 and they lived on about £11 a year. My granny always wore a man's cap, and I can picture her out feeding the hens with this cap on and feeding the pigs. Oh, it was a lovely wee place.

All my family were in good jobs. I wasn't trained for anything special, but they were. My Dad was a blacksmith and I remember where my sisters worked, they called it 'the baggie'. They made canvas bags of jute - it was famous for jute, Dundee. So they used to say "oh aye, she works in the baggie."

Tilda, my second oldest sister, she always worked in farmhouses. She lived with my granny and granddad for quite a long time and then when they died, she had to get jobs outside because she never married. And she went all over housekeeping for different farmers.

And my mother looked after all her babies. Before that, she was a table maid, she knew all the silver service, she knew all expert ways to set the table and she used to tell us kids why they got a cup of coffee at twelve o'clock at night to waken them up. At that time, ordinary people didn't have coffee, it was too expensive. It just came down to the working class throughout the years.

And then I had cousins who lived in service. Well, it was really all they could do in those days. I don't remember hearing about typists, not a lot, or anything like that. But being in the country, it's all they could get.

We came to Glasgow in 1914. It was the year of the First World War and I remember the soldiers, young lads, I can picture them now, marching down Cathcart Road, and singing, going to the war, just young things. Well, it's a strange thing, the First World War, I would just be eight when it started and I just remember the names of the big battles like Ypres.

Well when we came to Glasgow my Dad got a better job. He got in with Beardmores, Parkhead Forge, a well-known firm. And strangely enough, in those days, ordinary people just got a house with a toilet outside, but we arrived in Glasgow and had a

toilet and a bathroom and hot water inside which was really, really something. It was just a flat, but it was a lovely flat on a main road, Cathcart Road. And we were there for a long, long time.

Tilda stayed with my gran and grandpa at that time but the rest all came to Glasgow. My oldest brother, Andrew, died the first of December 1914. He took a burst appendix and he was taken to hospital, the Victoria Infirmary. My Dad went with him. And he wasn't right back till the policeman was at the door to say that he was dead, he was only eighteen. Oh, I had good looking brothers too that were handsome.

And Jack, Jack had asthma. And he died aged 24. My wee sister, Annie, she was nine and she had valvular disease of the heart but they could have sorted that out now. You see, at that time, they didn't do operations on the heart, I don't think they did it at all. My Mum was only 58, when she died. I think she was tired out. Hers was a heart condition too. Oh, she was lovely. My Dad was so tall and she was quite tiny. And my Dad was 65 when he died. We thought nothing of it at that time. There were so many young deaths.

Each year we got parcels from the farm when granddad killed the pig. We got pork and mealy puddings, we called them, they were white puddings. And they were rolled in newspaper and then brown paper and hanging out, a chicken, and all these bits and pieces. They sent them through the post. Although I didn't like the pork, there was too much fat and not much lean on it and Dad made you swallow it. And I just couldn't get it down. You don't waste things. You get into the habit of that.

My Dad was in the Black Watch and played the pipes, it was lovely. And I remember in Cathcart Road, he used to play them (laughs) you know what bagpipes are like outside, he played them in the house, practically every day, and he marched up and down.

I don't know if you've ever heard about the Gorbals in Glasgow? Well, it was a Jewish community at that time, and this Mrs. Silver stayed next door to us, she was quite a character, a lovely old lady. And she was a Jewess and we found that she was ill with pleurisy, so I'd say to my Dad "you'd better not play your bagpipes" but two weeks later, she came to the door, when I opened my door, she was at hers and she says "Maggie..." at that time I was called Maggie, she says "Maggie..." she says "is your Dad alright?" I said "oh aye, he's fine" she says "oh, I missed hearing his bagpipes playing" (all laugh). She says "as you know, I've been in my bed ill and that would just have cheered me up". I say, "Well he's stopped playing in your honour."

And I had a friend, Rose, (another Jewess) and we were friends for years and she used to say to me "mind, you'll not come in and see my house just perfection, but go into any of these cupboards and they're perfection" she says, "I think that's more important". She was a character. She married a Christian and she was barred from the family then, her Mum spoke to her but her Dad took nothing to do with her. She was only 18, but they were together all their days, Rose and Alec.

I went to Annette Street School and then Calder Street Public School. I stayed there until I was 15 and I left with a certificate of merit. It was just the start of leaving at fifteen. Before that, they left at fourteen and you could choose your job really at that time, there were so many jobs going, no bother to get one. And if you got that extra year, you seemed to get a better job.

And we were a church family. We went to the parish church. It was important to us. My Dad didn't just preach it, he went to church... funny, I don't remember my Mum going to church, she didn't have time (laughs). She was always at home but he practised what he preached.

And I'm telling you, the sermons in these days were about an hour long, it was the most boring thing. I worked in a shop, in a confectioners and we didn't close until ten o'clock on a Saturday night and I was so tired, they'd come and try and wake me up on a Sunday morning and I'd say "oh, I'll go to the two o'clock service" so I used to go to the two o'clock service. And I sat up the stair and the minister kept looking up at me, I think, to keep my eyes open.

We started work at nine o'clock until ten o'clock at night. It never gave me a thought. And we were on our feet all that time, thirteen hours. When I started out, I had to wash the floors. Aye, I thought I was getting a good job, I wanted to be a shorthand typist and the lady in the next house said "oh no, you can't shut you up anywhere for a whole day, you'll need to get out in the air". So she got me into a shop and the door had to be left wide open. So I'm telling you, you were frozen in the shop. I remember one day the boss came and the snow was blowing right in. So I had closed the door and he came in and opened it and opened it wide and just looked at me and we just looked at each other. So when he went away, after about ten minutes, I just went and closed it again. And he popped back to see if the door was open. So we had a few words then. He wanted it open so his customers would know to get in, in case they thought the shop was closed.

So I thought I'd got quite a good job and the first thing I was told to do was to get a pail of water and get down on my knees and scrub the floor. And if anybody walked on it I had to go over it and over it and over it. You did just stop and wipe your hands and serve the customer. It wouldn't be allowed now. Later I was in charge there.

I met Willie, my husband, at that time. He worked in another shop, so that's how we met each other. We went together for fourteen years. I wasn't married until I was 32. We used to go up to my family... and he had to sit in our house with my Mum and

Dad. Dad and him sat and spoke about football and all the sports and I just sat and listened (laughs) and that was our romance.

But apart from that, we went rambling in the country at the weekends, which was good. Balloch and Milngavie, I liked outdoors, yes. You often wonder if that accounts for your life too, getting all that fresh air and the stamina you had to put into it. We thoroughly enjoyed it, you met so many nice people too, out on the road. At first it was the tram car you got as far as it would go, Killermont, out in Milngavie. And then you had to walk from there, it was a great life. I think it's been quite good for your health and everything, doing all that.

We waited 14 years to get married. It was so ridiculous, we were always waiting until we had more money, but the more money never happened. So we finally decided to just take the plunge and get on with it. We got married in 1938 and William had two pounds fifty a week that was his wages. You can hardly believe that yourself! You know, I'm going way back all these years, but we were always happy, we had a nice wee home, not a lot of money, of course, but we always managed.

And I remember the Second World War, Don was just a baby and then Margaret, who lives in Cheshire, just fifteen months between them, so I had two babies at that time. So I always say he was a pre-war baby, Don, 1939, Margaret was 1940, a war baby and then along came Bill in 1945 and he was a post-war baby (all laugh). One before and one in the middle and one after and I was such a great sleeper that I was in the hospital having Margaret and they came and put the babies in the bed beside us and I never even knew! There was an alarm, I was sound asleep and the baby was put beside me till the alert was over and then taken away again and I hadn't a clue. I was so sleepy, but you seem to just take these things in your stride, strangely enough.

And all the rationing and everything and standing in queues, somebody would come and say “oh, the fruit shop has got bananas” and you’d run round and stand in the queue. We hardly knew what bananas were during the war. They would get so many in and just sell them and it was quite a while then before they had another lot. People just got on with it. They just got on with their life. You just had to carry on.

Oh yes, oh, I remember the night of the Clydebank bombing, that was really, really a bad time. It was either the 14th and 15th of May, was it... or June. Oh, they were two terrible nights. And it was a full moon, it was like daylight and there was a church across the road from us and they were just coming out after a concert, walking along the street, and I said to my husband “oh, well we’ll ask some of them to come in,” and he says “no, Meg,” he says “just let them get home if they can manage it.” And there was a landmine dropped in the school across the road and I remember hearing it, we were sitting in a corner that we used when there was bombing going on. So we were evacuated for four days because of that. We wouldn’t have been here if it had gone off.

We were in the house when that happened but before that, we used to go over to the school; there was a bomb shelter, just a wee building with seats all round it, and no safety at all. And my husband says “Meg, we don’t go back there again.” We went one night and Margaret had the whooping cough at the time and I took her out on a bitter cold night, and sat in this shelter. And two of the other people’s children took the whooping cough off her, so I never heard the end of that either.

And I remember there were always funny wee bits too each time a bomb dropped, our bell rang... it was one of these bells... it was brass, you pulled it out and then it went up on a string and along the hall. And every time the bomb dropped, this bell rang, it was strange.

My husband was in the Albion Motor Works, he worked there all during the war. That was good. We were there together with the children. And we had a happy life, as I say, we never had a lot of money but we had a very happy life. I used to say if I'd lived after the war the way we had to live during the war, I would have been well-off because I would get a pound of bacon, maybe with my order, and cut all the rind off it and that made soup. Well I stopped all that when the war stopped, I stopped using the rinds of a ham because it was a great feeling to go in and get an end of ham or something. Well, we made big pots of broth and you could get a good bone, a marrow bone, and that gave you good stock for your soup. That's just what you did, to make the best of it.

But I can remember that, the rationing, oh it was terrible. You got very little, we just had to make do, likely be filled up with potatoes. Even potatoes sometimes were scarce. I remember, once I got a bag of potatoes and that was great, and that did me for quite a long time. But the rationing was really, really bad. Oh aye, well it was really hard. After the war was over, oh, it was a great feeling to think you could... well, it was quite a while before you could go and buy things that you wanted, it took its time to get back to normal.

When my husband died I thought he was really old and he was 55 and I was 54 and I felt quite old, I think I felt older then than I do now. Aye, it's a strange feeling. Yes, for a time I felt older than I do now until I started to live again and get out and I would never join a club and my friend, wee Bessie, she kept at me to go to the Friendship club and I would say "oh, I'm not going amongst a lot of old folks" but I eventually went. And oh, what I missed all these years, it was lovely, meeting up every week, and I enjoy the Women's Guild.

Well, I don't go now to the weekly thing, but they always invite me to the Christmas dinner and the Easter dinner, and I go to them, as a special guest. Aye good friends

and good friendships, make a difference. I go to bingo. That keeps the mind active as well, so I quite enjoy that and I love my game of Scrabble.

I used to write letters into the paper if I was annoyed about anything or criticised things. I wrote the letters regularly. My very first letter I wrote about how I had a pound in my hand to get my paper and I was so busy watching all the people dropping their tickets on the floor of the bus and that annoyed me that I put my pound in the box where the old tickets were! I got roses for that.

And there was one about people getting poor wages for their hard work. I was fighting, but I think people who do minor jobs are just as important as people in high paid jobs, I always felt that, that they should get recognised as being equal. Another letter was about people washing their stairs. "It gives the place a better look if the outside is as nice as the inside"... oh, I got £20 for that one. I wasn't ignorant or anything but I went out housecleaning after I lost my husband and I felt I had a purpose to get up for in the morning and so things like that made me write.

I worked for Dr. Menzies Campbell and I got on very well with her. I was 82 I think when she died and I had to give it up. And Dr. Rennie was her doctor and he came up to her flat, and he said "would you like to take another job Mrs. Melvin?" I says "do you not think I'm due a rest now doctor?" He says "no," he says, "you're a very healthy woman," and he says "that's what's kept you going is getting up in the morning and coming out," and he says "I would love for you to take another job." And the only thing I regretted was I never asked him what the job was. I was 82. So I think it was possibly, maybe to work in his house because I worked in Dr. Campbell's house. I did dusting and Hoovering and everything. I started off doing that and I finished up cooking for her and washing for her and everything, she didn't even have a washing machine.

Funny, I never thought of my age, I never said 'I'm 80, I can't do that,' or 'I'm 90'. I used to go to Canada every year to see my son until I was 98. Oh, I loved that, I miss it terribly. If I could do it, I did it and that's, I think, what's kept me going too. So I always say 'now if you see me without my earrings, you'll know I'm done' (all laugh).

What's been one of the most important events in my life? Well you could say your family, but that's a usual thing. But when Don was born, that was a big occasion I must say, and then when I turned a hundred, that was a lovely feeling. Aye, we had all these different events and all the excitement, but that was great. I got over 200 cards. We had a party at the Pond hotel and people came from all over the world. And then we had a party in here the next day and then the Friendship club had a party for me a couple of weeks later and even the bingo hall had a big party. I know I'm quite popular.

What's my secret? Well I don't know whether it's just that I don't jump at things, I take time to think, and I always have excuses for people. There's a woman in here, and poor soul, her mind must be away but she's been nasty to me a few times and just... not last night but the night before, she was coming up the corridor and I was sat at the table and she walked in and naturally I'm looking at her and she shouts "I hope you're getting your eyes filled". She's got a very nasty tongue, I was quite upset. And yet, I still make excuses for her, I say "well, probably ..." I would love to know what she was like when she was... the only words I can use are when she was 'at herself' as my mother used to say. You know, younger, and she had her faculties about her.

If I could wish for one thing now it would be that my husband had lived longer. Aye, I think that's the most important, because we were really very happy together. Now, I don't want to be any bother to anybody (laughs). You know, just to be able to live my life in peace. I love my surroundings. You see the wee squirrels come out

occasionally, oh, we've got snowdrops out. I've even made a poem about it. Shall I say it to you?

The lovely snowdrop, as white as snow,
Makes way for the crocus all aglow,
And then the daffodils appear,
Like yellow carpets everywhere,
And now the cherry blossom leaves,
Are dancing gently in the breeze.
What a lovely time of year,
After the winter dark and dreary

'Springtime' I call it. I sent that into the People's Friend... I was a good scholar. I really was. I feel I could have done more with my life with the education I had, but I was happy with what I did. I had my say.

CHAPTER 8

MINNIE

Born October 1907



Introduction

Minnie is 102 years old. She lives in Belmont Avenue, Belfast, by herself and is occupant of the same house since her marriage to Jim in 1936. She married Jim when she was 28 and she describes her marriage as the best time in her life. They travelled a lot in later life. This couple didn't have any children themselves, but there is a cast of hundreds of other family members who are seriously interested in Minnie. Mary, her niece, said that 'Auntie Minnie has lots of friends and they might be granddaughters, daughters of her friends, but they still come to see her and they still come to look after her because they love her. She helped them when times were tough'. Further Mary said to me (Tina), 'Auntie Minnie is a very independent woman, she only has her home help for an hour in the week and she has a person check every morning to make sure she's okay. She still makes soda bread for us on a Saturday'. Other than making bread, Minnie no longer cooks for herself but her family and friends seem prepared to deliver her meals.

The area in which Minnie lives was the centre of the 'Troubles', the conflict between the Roman Catholic and Protestant populations. A police station was just around the corner of Belmont Avenue and the barricades had only recently come down. A few blocks away, over 500 people had died in various conflict situations in the 1970s and 1980s. Minnie must have been influenced by all of this yet she did not talk about those events at all. She did talk about the RMS Titanic which was built on her doorstep in the Harland and Wolff shipyard, Belfast. Living on the coast as a child, she recalls the trial run of this ship on the horizon. Of course, as a five year old, watching this ship out at sea, she would have been unaware of the huge interest then in the ship's construction and she would have been oblivious to the frenzied account of its sinking in 1912. Even in 2010 this Belfast shipyard draws tourist dollars to the area.

Minnie's story

I was born in 1907 in a wee townland called Ballywhisken, down the Ards Peninsula on the shore. We were very poor for a start there was very little money in the family. We had very little. I had older cousins and I had to wear their clothes and things, you didn't have money for new clothes. I was 20 before I had a new coat. But we were brought up to be clean ... there was always a basin of water ready and you had to wash yourself and wash your hands.

But apart from all that, there was very little food. Father had a big garden and he grew potatoes and vegetables and that helped during the winter months. We were lucky if we had meat on Sunday. We had a few hens, and I remember one time we had a pet hen, Blackie. Mother killed Blackie for our dinner. And not one of us would take the soup or the hen, not one of us, and so we got no dinner that day. And the people next door, there was a big family there too; I can remember my mother taking that pot across to them. I always remember that. Oh, we were not going to eat Blackie.

My mother baked soda bread and wheaten bread. It was plain loaf in those days, we didn't have pan loaf at first and it was always a plain loaf. There was no sliced bread either in those days and we very seldom had butter, we couldn't afford butter but there was margarine. It was called Pheasant margarine and there was a big bird on the paper packet. There was a competition to guess how many pheasants were on the piece of paper and my mother guessed right and I think we got free margarine for three or four weeks. Butter was a treat, we just got half a pound of country butter from Mrs Ralston every week and a big can of buttermilk, and Mother used that for baking. And you didn't buy flour in small bags. You got it in an eight or a ten stone bag of flour. You wore them! (*all laugh*) In those days, you had to wear a chemise and you made them yourself, form the flour bags. You just cut a shape through each sleeve. And they were also used for making sheets. Four of them made a sheet. These flour bags were

used for everything. And you had to bleach them and some of the letters were very hard to get out.

Father went to sea sometimes; he would have got a job on one of the Headline boats sometimes in the wintertime. And he worked for the farmers who used to grow flax. The flax was worked, you pulled it and retted it in water and then it was taken to the London mills and made into linen. My father was a very hard man and he expected a lot from us. When he worked in the mill I had to take my father's breakfast up every morning. I was only about six when I had to walk about a mile to take his breakfast. I had two sorts of soup plates and mother put his breakfast on one, put the lid on the top and a wee can of tea. They had cans in those days with lids and the lid served as a cup. I had to take that up to the mill every morning and if I had been a minute late, I'd have got a wallop. My father was so hard on us older ones that I never could get any real affection for my father. I respected him if you know what I mean, but he never was... I struggled with it.

As the oldest child of nine, I had a lot of responsibility. My mother depended on me for helping her with the younger ones. I suppose I was old before my time, I had to grow up quickly. But it was a hard life, it was a hard life for we older ones, the younger ones, I think, had it easier. I was always late for school. I had to take his breakfast up every morning; consequently I was about 10 or 15 minutes late, but there was an arrangement made with my mother and the teacher that I wasn't slapped for being late.

I was slapped for lots of other things at school but not for being late. We amused ourselves at school. My schooldays were quite happy, I liked reading at school. Well, I had two teachers in school and Miss Anderson was the primary teacher for the infants. Mrs Matier was the teacher for older children and I was her pet for a while, except for writing and drawing (*laughs*). I used to take charge of lessons now and again when she

was busy. And then exams in those days, we didn't go anywhere for an exam, somebody came to examine us from the school board once a year and I was good at answering all the questions you got into her class and if not, you had to stay another year. I was one of the lucky ones, I got up to fifth class and if I'd had the opportunity I'd be in sixth if I had been allowed to stay at school.

I cried when I had to leave school. These people called Williams came from another part of the country to the shore every year for a holiday and they had three children. So of course, my mother said that I could go to help. Mrs Williams was so pleased with me that she asked my mother, could I come with her? And in those days, you could have got off school very easily although you were supposed to go to school until you were 14. But I left school when I was twelve. It nearly broke my heart for a while, but once I got away from home, I stayed away.

I'm fond of reading but now my eyes are playing up I can't read. I miss my reading so much. I liked biographies and history. I was always good at history and geography at school; I've still got three or four certificates upstairs for 100 per cent answering questions. Things that I was really interested in I was good at it, but I couldn't draw a straight line and I wasn't a very good writer. Those old spindly nibs were dipped into the ink bottle and they did everything but write, and you had ink all over your palms.

I had many service jobs and I lived in with the people I worked for. When I was only 13 I worked in the manor house in Donaghadee. Later I went to Gregg's shop at the corner on Ormeau Road, at the very top, but I was only there for about a month. It was the most awful place, I saw Mrs Gregg in the morning and she gave the order for what she wanted done, cooking and so on, and then I never saw her till the next morning. I saw nobody all day, so I just gave my notice and that was that. I could have been 14 or 15 when I went work in Lansdown Road with Mrs Towell. I was there for 18

months. I liked working there. He was a sea captain and did a lot of cruising in South America. He was only home about once in three months.

I got my new coat when I was in service with Mrs Towell. In those days you had clothes sent up from the big shops in town, they sent them up on approval. I was not a lot taller than Mrs Towell and I was the same size. I was asked to try it on and if she liked it on me, she usually liked it on herself. And I liked this coat but I couldn't afford to get it, for I had to send the money home to mother. She said she would pay for it and I could give her so much out of my wages each week. I know I was twenty when I got that coat and I think I still have a photograph of it.

I met my husband, Jim, when I was working for Mrs Truman. I met him when I was about 25. I met him through Mrs Wilson who lived in Partelo Street and I was working in town here and she asked me for tea one day and Jimmy was lodging with her. And we got married in 1936.

I was married from the house where C.S. Lewis lived. It's a lovely house. I was working there at the time. I was married on Easter Tuesday and I had the week off and then I went back again and stayed with them until September. I was married in April and went back until they got someone else to take my place. I used to go up on the bicycle. C.S. Lewis has become prominent; he must have been at college when I was working there. But it was a lovely house and part of it was closed off. And I often wonder if the wardrobe in that story, *Narnia*, was up in the attic. I don't know whether it was or not.

I've lived in Belmont Avenue ever since 1936 but I only know a few in this avenue now. Well I do, I know about three families. I don't think there's the same friendliness in people that there was in years gone past. Before, if you went out to shake your mat outside, somebody would have come out of their house to do the same

thing, and you had a wee chat. Or you'd be out in the garden and somebody would pass by for a chat. And if you were sick, your next door neighbour would have been in and made you a cup of tea or helped. There was more friendliness and more neighbourliness than there is now. Although, I'm very lucky, I have two very good neighbours and they're both much younger than me.

We went to the Anglican Church; we called it the Church of Ireland over here. We had to go to Sunday School and church; Sunday School was at a quarter past ten and on a Sunday morning you had to get up and go... I'm sure it was... it must have been two miles. Somebody met you when you came out of Sunday school, Granny or Father or somebody met you with a wee sandwich or two biscuits or something. And then you went on to the church service and you weren't home until about twenty minutes to two. Then you got your dinner and then we had to always go in to Granny and tell her what hymns we were singing and what the rector had preached. And I'm sure we told her all lies (*laughs.*) Granny must have known we were making it all up. When Granny Dorrian went to church she had a skirt to the ground and her cape with sequins and her bonnet and all the rest of it. And she wouldn't have gone out without her gloves. She would say to my mother, "Mary, is my skirt straight? Is my cape alright?" Granny Dorrian was a very proud old woman, thinking of it now, she was very proud. We had to go back to church again at night, and go straight home from church. We weren't allowed out. If you had a boyfriend, you left him at the corner; you didn't take him to the gate.

The Titanic was built here in Belfast. I can remember the Titanic doing her sea trials up and down the Irish Sea and it just didn't mean anything to me, the Titanic, at that time, it was in later life I realised everybody was interested in it because it was supposed to be unsinkable, but that didn't mean anything to me at the time. I was only about four or five when I saw the Titanic. It had four big funnels on it and there were

always three of them smoking. I wondered about the fourth one, but it was there just for decoration.

My father died when he was 57 but my mother lived until she was 96. I'm the oldest of nine, but two of them died in infancy. Rebecca died when she was ten months and Frankie died when he was three months. Seven survived to adulthood, five girls and two boys. I see my brother James aged 91. He comes over every Friday. My other brother Frankie, aged 90, I see occasionally.

I think the happiest time of my life was when I was married and when I say that, don't think we didn't quarrel, because we did. Many's the time I wasn't going to speak to Jim in my life again. Then I'd go out and meet somebody and I'd come in, 'Oh Jim, do you know who I met?' I'd already forgotten that I was not speaking to him. He'd say "Goodness; you're a one, speaking to him". So that was the end of that quarrel.

Yes, I think the happiest time of my life really was when I was married. I was really happy and carefree. We understood each other and could talk things out. He had more sense than me, he used to say to me, "If you would think before you speak, you'd get on better." He told me that many a time, I do know I am impulsive; I don't get cross very easily, up till lately. I think now that I'm older my patience is... I get frustrated with not being able to see. And now I can't walk very well and I get frustrated, I think, rather than anything else.

I had a good routine, I used to bake on a Friday morning, I made cakes and biscuits and that kind of baking. And then on Saturday morning, I made soda and wheaten and potato bread and pancakes. You had a day for doing everything, you did your washing on Monday and your ironing on Tuesday, and cleaned upstairs one week and downstairs the next week and I always kept a day for doing windows and lights and mirrors and pictures.

I like my food, I like good food and I think there are far too many artificial things on the market now, you can go out and buy chips and fish whereas we had to make all those. It's not the kind of thing you want. Well, good food to me would be getting a nice piece of meat, a bone or something, and making soup, making it myself, and making a casserole or having a change of dinners, making our own rather than going out and buying fish and chips. I think quite a lot of people do that and I don't mind fish and chips once a week or so, but to go out every day and buy these ready made things, I don't think it's good. Oh yes, I like vegetables, I like nearly everything, the only thing I can't eat and to save my life is a soft-boiled egg, the very look of it! But I can take a hard-boiled egg, I like hard-boiled egg with salt or I like a hard-boiled egg for sandwiches or I like scrambled egg, but I make sure that it's cooked.

'I can't cook now because I can't see properly to do things'. I get fresh fish every Tuesday and I usually steam it over a couple of potatoes, but I'm helped to do this by the girl next door. She is very good. She often phones me and she'll say, "don't make anything" I'll bring you in some..." No, food's not a problem really; I can make myself a cup of tea.

I try and keep going for a start, I would hate to have to sit down here and never get out. And I like to see people that are coming in, I like to meet people. However I can act cross and when I'm cross, I'm cross. And I like to get it out.

My attitude to life is about tolerance and patience. I don't think people are tolerant enough. You've got to be patient. Yes, you are entitled to have your opinion, but we're all entitled to our opinions. I think you have to have patience and try to agree on certain points but understand that other people are also entitled to their opinions. Well you just have to have patience and maybe you have someone that you can talk things over with, if you get worried, really worried about something, there's usually someone

that you can talk things over with and whether they can help you or not doesn't always matter. It's always something that will probably resolve itself, you just don't know.

I wish I could have had more education and done something more positive with my life, I think I would have wished for that. If I did it all over again with the knowledge of what I have been through, I think I may have tried to have had more education, that would have been my wish. Also I wish to die in my sleep, and give no bother to anybody!!

I know one thing: I'm a spoilt, pampered old woman.

CHAPTER 9

JESS

Born August 1908



Jess story

I was born in Newcastleton in the Scottish Borders in 1908. When my mother died, my sister Margaret who was the eldest daughter took over and she more or less brought us all up. She was 17 and I was seven. Mary and Jimmy were a little older than me and Emily and Davey were younger. We spent time with my grandfather, Gaff, who was a very clever man and he told us about trees and flowers and all kind of things. He had his own fields and it took him more or less his life looking after it. He had sheep and cattle, but then for an income, he used to let some of his cattle out and people would get the milk from these cows. Then my grandfather would get paid for the milk. So that was how he made his little bit of a living because he had two daughters at home, my aunts.

Mary, my sister, used to go to our cousin's farm in the holidays and she learnt very young, how to milk and other country ways. I loved warm milk, milk into the mug and I could drink it and I was the only one that would do that because they didn't like the milk straight from the cow. They thought it had a rotten taste, that's what they told me. But I didn't think so, no, not a bit. And you have no idea how different I became because I got fat and I'd never been fat in my life, never at all, never. And I had quite round cheeks with drinking this milk and I used to go to my grandfather's byre when he was milking and I had my tinny with me, this little tin mug, and he used to milk into this and I drank it. And maybe he would do another can full. I'd always been very thin, so for the first time in my life, I began to put fat on.

My father was called William. We called him Pop, Pop Robson, aye, he got a nickname. He was a joiner, but on his off time and holidays he always got little jobs on the railway. It was a financial way of looking at it. Oh yes, he could do with the money. A proper joiner was very expensive so there were always other jobs. He wouldn't get very much for it I don't think. I used to take his lunch and sit on the

railway side with him and take my lunch, as well. I watched him working with wood. I then did a lot of woodwork at home.

I liked woodwork at school and I was always very advanced because I had learned it at home with my father. It wasn't that he was teaching me, I was just absorbing what he was doing. Well, I was very fond of joinery work, because strange as it may seem I thought that a joiner was everything. At school I could show off to the boys and the girls how to use the tools properly. And the teacher used to say "how did you learn like that?" and I said "oh, my father's a joiner." My father took the blame for it! She asked me to show the class so then my head got bigger because I used to say "that's not the way to hold a plane" or "that's not the way to hold a screwdriver".

My mother was a dressmaker before she was married. She made clothes, for all these young people and schoolchildren and for the gentry. And I can remember, hearing Margaret my eldest sister talk: "don't you tell anybody who we're making clothes for." Well, that was mother's business, you see.

So I was used to sew a lot at home. All the girls in the family were knitters and sewers, fancy work and making dolls' clothes. I always remember my older sister used to cut things out for me and I used to sew them by hand. But I used a machine too. It was a Singer machine with the treadle. I wasn't to use it unless there was somebody there but I liked best using it when there was nobody there (*all laugh*). Oh yes, I was sewing on a machine long before the family knew because if they were all out, I would say "I hope you'll not be long in coming back" and Margaret used to say "oh, we'll be ever so late because we've got to go to so and so". That of course, was what I wanted. So I had a grand time at the machine because I had all the things ready to sew with pins in, I made a lot of dolls' clothes and I made them for our girls, sewed them on the machine because most of the children didn't get to use the machine at all, but then I was brought up using it. I wasn't bad either at counting and reading because my sister

was very, very good and she brought my counting up to the mark quite well. I learned a lot from her because she was a very clever girl.

I was allowed to stay at school until I was 14 and when I left I got work as a dressmaker. There was a woman in the village, old fashioned people, I'd been friendly with for years and years and years. So one day, I was in their shop and they had a dressmakers' bit at the back but I was in the shop buying something and they asked me if I wouldn't like to come for so many hours a week and I'd be employed with them. Well, of course, I was never making any money so I thought 'gosh, this is maybe a chance to make a little money' so I said "yes, I'll start on Monday." So I arrived on Monday and I said to my father, I had to wait a fortnight before I got paid and he said "that's not good enough, you should be paid every week and tell her that." So, of course, I had to pluck up courage and say that my father said that all payees are paid by the week and I can remember as clear as anything, she turned round to me and she said "you would be the first one to do it too!" So I started there, in Jane Thompson's shop. It was a milliners and she also made clothes for people. I was there a while, until 15 or 16. I quite liked it really. I did hand embroidery from early on and helped with wedding dresses too.

I was getting offers of jobs at Hawick and Carlisle but this was too far away. I didn't want to go away, so I stuck in at home. And I used to have girls come to the house, just to learn the little things, the beginning of how to go about either cutting something out and started to sew by hand. Oh yes, I tend to do hand work because I was a hand work sewer and you have to serve your time, to be a hand sewer, so I had done my two years.

I liked to make things myself. Well, I would struggle along with something and my aunt would say "oh, give it to me and I'll do it for you." She was just teaching me how to put a hem in, you know, to fold it over and measure it and to put the pins in

correctly and then hem it and then if it was complete, I would embroider it. And I didn't want to hurt her so I let her do it and I threw it in the fire when she wasn't looking because it didn't count if I did not make it myself.

I got to the stage I tried to make everything; I wouldn't have anything in the house if I didn't make it. I was doing things for my sisters when they had a home of their own. I would say "oh well, get me the material and I'll make it". I made all the children's clothes. Very often, it was my own designs. I made my own wedding dress and the embroidery took a lot of work, I can tell you. It was a sort of creamy colour.

One of the biggest things that happened to me was when I went to St. Andrews. St. Andrews was very smart and Newcastleton was very, very much a village. But I knew St. Andrews awfully well, of course, because my married sister Margaret was there. She was a cook. And sometimes I went to help in the house where she worked. I loved St. Andrews. All the students were there and all the young girls congregated in St. Andrews because there was any amount of young fellas, they were twelve a penny you know. You could have two or three boyfriends and nobody bothered. Oh yes, I was a very social person, well it was just my nature. But I often think lying back in bed and not sleeping and I think about my young life, I thoroughly enjoyed it, what a good life I had. I had loads of boyfriends and I could ditch one and pick up the other one, I was kind of cruel with them. That was life!

I met my husband George in St Andrews. He was at St. Andrews University at the time and he had a lot of friends. And it was very funny because he used to say to me "so and so was asking if you'd like to mend his jacket. He said he tore his jacket and he daren't go home 'cos his mother got very cross". And he says "aye, my girlfriend is a dressmaker, I'm sure she would mend your jacket" so of course, he arrived at the door with the jacket to mend and my sister was standing behind me and he looked over my shoulder and he said to the young chap "that will cost you" and he pulls the

thing out of my hand. He says “I can’t afford it” and I pulled it back, I said “I wasn’t going to take anything for it” and my sister said to me “you’ll never get fat if you don’t charge.” But I said “this is a pal”.

In 1928 before I left Newcastleton I started the Women’s Rural Institute there. I am the only one alive of the original group. Folk never would believe it today I don’t think. I was awfully keen at that kind of thing. And there were such a lot of young people the same age as myself that couldn’t sew; they couldn’t even put a button on. And there were competitions every week, different things with sewing and baking. It would be a spell of sewing and it would be a draw-in skirt at the top, they put it in a band, you know the idea. And it would be full at the top with maybe two buttonholes. It would be fancy.

And also I had been gardening for a long time but I had not much time but I would certainly sit in the garden at half past five in the morning just to get the little hour in that I normally had. Because at this time, I was working at Jane Thompson’s, so I had to be there by eight o’clock, so I had not much time, but I liked to get a little bit of gardening in too. I used to like making gardens. I was a nosey parker and I’d see folk with a new house and I would lean on the rake, over the gate and say what I would do with that, and before I knew where I was, I had a great deal of folk around me and that was the folk from the house. And I would tell them what they could do with their garden, like a brass neck, I think I was born with a brass neck. Well, I was very keen and I could look at a garden and see what was wrong with it. Many a time I was told to away home. I used to keep in for maybe a week and then I would take a walk past their garden and they hadn’t started to sort it, and if the man appeared, if he saw me, he would appear, and I would say “you’ll not get done very fast, would you like me to come in and give you a hand?” And he said “you would like to come in and give me a hand would you?” and I said “well, it would cost you.” “Oh, I thought you were going to do it for nothing” and I said “how much do you do for nothing?”

In the First World War I was six and I used to go and watch the troop trains from the lakeside. And such a lot of them didn't come back. I was so chicken-hearted, I could go home and cry all night because the soldiers who go to the war, they get killed, I used to think they were just going to get killed. Tears used to run down my face, I used to be so sorry for them going away to their fate, to fight those horrible Germans.

At the beginning of the war I took a pair of slippers to the shoemaker to be mended and then he was called up. And they were left in the window, yes, and they faded and shrank because they were maybe kind of damp or something. I went in to the shop one day and asked the chap if I could try on a shoe in the window. He says "what are you going to do?" "Well" I said "...it really belongs to me and I was just wondering what they'll be like when the war's over and I get the shoes back." So I tried it on, but of course, I couldn't get my toe in.

And after the war there was the flu epidemic and my father used to say every day when I went out "don't you bring back the flu." But I didn't get it. Nobody in the family got it. A lot of people died, I had relatives that died. It was a bad time, it was a horrible time really, I remember thinking "goodness, I wonder when I'm grown up, will I forget about it?" I have forgotten, the tragedy of it, but it was terrible really.

We had an even worse tragedy in the Second World War. An aeroplane crashed into my mother in law's house two houses away from us, so we saw it all and she was killed and so was her daughter. We weren't allowed to talk about it because it was a British plane. Oh, it was a terrible time. We were still in Cowdenbeath which was my husband's own home town. He got a school there after he graduated when daughters Rosemary and Olive were born in Dunfermline. But after the war, we went to Kirkcaldy and then after a few years, my husband got the headmaster's job at Limekilns. I was very fond of Limekilns. I joined everything, in fact, my husband used

to say I was never in my own house except through the night to sleep. All the family were involved in the church

We got a car for the first time but I had no intention to drive, that was my attitude, I said I was always going to be driven, that's how I looked at it, and nothing would tempt me to learn. I would not go in even when nobody was there and sit in the driving seat, no way. Oh yes, I was so brave about a lot of things but I wasn't going to drive. I think I'd seen too many accidents, yes. And I never learned to ride a bicycle.

But I was always very keen on travelling, I just loved it. I've been to New York, Nassau and Canada three times. Somebody read something out saying that I hated the Germans because they were so brutal. When they fought, they did not fight clean, that was exactly what I said and, of course, everybody said I'll get into terrible hot water over that. And my father warned me "just keep inside because you might get your head shot off" so there were weeks and months I never rose over the doorstep. But the funny thing, to this day, I've very close friends in Germany. And I get letters regularly and cards, when they're away on holidays, they always will send cards. I have been to Germany and all the Baltic countries as well as many in the Mediterranean too.

How do I move on? I don't know, just determination sometimes made me move on and a very good thing to do, is to change things. And I always kept my friends. At my 100th birthday I got 101 cards and I was getting cards from all over the world. Goodness me, and I was so proud when I got to be a 100. There was a party for the family. Yes, oh yes, we always had lots of parties. We could always make an excuse. Then all my friends came individually for months.

My daughter Rosemary and her sons visit me here with her grandson Rowen and granddaughter Elise. So does daughter Olive with her daughter Christian and grandson

Tom and granddaughter Samantha. My grandson George and his wife Hazel and his children, my great grandchildren, visit me regularly.

This is a nice quiet room, isn't it? Very nice and airy and sunny and there's no noise or anything outside. All the children have been very good and I always appreciate them coming. I enjoy playing with Elise's dolls. I was so fond of dolls, you've no idea. I had more dolls than any other child in the village. Well, if any of my family was away on their holidays and they saw a nice doll in a shop window, they bought it for me.

I've made a lot of tapestries and I like doing it. I've made them for exhibitions and I once made quite a big one and it was raffled. The person that won it didn't want it and they told me I could sell it for them and I said "well I'll try" so I sold it. They gave me half the money which I gave to breast cancer research, because my sister Mary died of breast cancer; it was twice as much they expected it to be.

I've used my hands ever since I had hands, because that's what hands are for, using. I even made leather gloves, aye, ever so many pairs of gloves in different colours. Yes, it was very fashionable, handmade gloves, but a lot of folk couldn't do them, they started but they were never finished because they were really quite difficult. Sometimes I would work until two o'clock in the morning; it was nothing to get something finished. It never bothered me. I always made things too for the competitions.

What were some of the major events in my life? Oh yes, there was a lot of things that affected my life that I had done and some of the things I was going to do. I had some mad things I wanted to do, but of course, my family stepped in. Yes, in the early days, I would just be an ordinary school girl. I was kind of daring and did daring sort of things. What a name to have!

Even as a child, I was terribly daring because we had a chimney and my father was going to take the old one down and put the new one up. And so we were all looking at it one day and there was this friend who was little and fat and there was a man who said he'd give a pound to her if she'd crawl up through and out the other end. But of course, you couldn't, you couldn't get out at the end, at the chimney bit and poor thing, I thought it was a shame. So I said to him, I says "oh, for goodness sake, give her half of the money, she did jolly well" and he says "no, no, she was supposed to crawl through" I says "good heavens, I should stick a tape measure and then measure her head and measure the space, it's impossible!" And he says "ah, I never thought about that". I says "give her the money and then let her get away home" so with my pressure, she got the money.

And there was this drain which wasn't terribly big, although it was broader than me. And we used to say we'd count the number of people who knew how to go through, crawl through the drain, and if you crawled through, you got your name printed on the inside with paint. So my name was on it several times because I'd crawled through. I was daring.

I had some great jaunts I can tell you, because people knew that I was brave. And somebody said to me "you're so brave" and my brother Jimmy was cross because everybody was blowing me up you see. And he leant forward and he said "just a bloody show-off" (*laughs*) and brought me down to size. Oh yes, there were a lot of things I had to put away because if my father caught me doing things he just would not allow it. I used to get on the roof, I don't know what it was, roofs fascinated me and I went up in a helicopter for my eightieth birthday.

If I could wish for one thing now, what would it be? Well, I've had a lot of wishes in my time and I always wished that I had been old enough and maybe a boy and learned to fly, and I told that to somebody once and they said "you don't need to be a boy to fly...you could learn to fly as a girl, just the same as a boy and probably be quite a good one because you are so daring." Yes, I would like to be able to fly over the top of the houses and know who the people were. I'd like to fly like a bird and drop soft things that would not break the slates, very, very colourful things that would be easily found.

What's important to me now? I still would like to keep on travelling. I remember my second cousin Peg, when she was quite a young girl, she and I used to have talks about where we'd like to go some day but somehow I always pictured Peg going too, we were independent but still liked somebody with us. Yes, there are still places I'd like to see.

Postscript

Following Pam's interview with Jess, her daughter Rosemary carried on talking to her mother about remembering the important events in her life. These were some of her memories about her late husband George.

George and I retired to Howgate to be near Rosemary as George had very bad Rheumatoid Arthritis. This was a very happy ten years, making my lovely garden and sitting in it together. Then I was widowed and lived alone for 20 years. I was very sad and missed him terribly.

I started to do embroideries for presents again as I had done a lot as wedding presents for my daughters in the 1960s and knitting for my grandchildren kept me busy. In fact I made so many, along with the girls' collection of my woodwork, tapestries, patchwork, upholstery, etc., we filled the Church Hall for an Exhibition to raise funds for Cancer Research. A quilt that I had made in my teens is on show in Canada. I helped in the Cancer Shop until I was too old to be insured but continued to make things to sell to raise funds especially Tiny Teddies.

Gathering wood in the wood was the most warming job I knew. I loved it, then sawing it up in the garage on wet days, then carrying it in to the house so that I could always keep a welcoming open fire. It was hard work but I enjoyed it and it was good for me.

Baking for Rosemary's Milk Bar took up a lot of my time, including my Cloutie Dumpling with which I won a National Competition, aged 75, with the prize, a glorious weekend at Gleneagles Hotel.

My greatest love was my garden where I worked sometimes six hours at a time. I took photos too so I have a lovely record of my creation. I missed it terribly when I went to live for ten years with Rosemary (I was supposed to need looking after!) I loved being outside and believe by working hard, doing heavy work, I was strong so I lived to be over a 100.

CHAPTER 10

EDWARD

Born December 1903



Introduction

Tina and Pam interviewed Edward on his 106th birthday in Norfolk. Edward lived independently in Cardiff until 2007 when he joined his youngest daughter Christina and her husband Robin in Norfolk. His Cardiff house had been badly damaged by fire caused by a faulty electric blanket. This could be viewed as a major turning point in his life. Although the community rallied to support him he could no longer live there. Yet he did not talk about it during the interview.

Another aspect of his life not mentioned was his marriage. Christina explained to us that they had to elope to London because his wife-to-be was disapproved of by Edward's father. She was Roman Catholic and the religion of the family was Church of England. Christina explained how her father dealt with these events. According to her he brackets off the things he doesn't want to remember and he moves on.

The storyline is about his early life and the work, work, work, his love for wood, all kinds of wood and not being idle. Another amazing feature was that all his siblings survived, and that this was most unusual in those times. We can speculate about the good nutrition as one of the reasons for survival

It was clear that Edward's immediate social network was extremely important and he was in constant praise of their attention and care. Routine appeared to be important; getting up at 11am, having lunch with a glass of wine, theatre or outings with Christina and Robin when time and weather allow, and watching a Quiz TV show together in the evenings when he likes to answer some of the questions. It was pointed out by Christina that Edward had an excellent mastery of vocabulary. He most certainly would have made it to university in another generation.

Christina said: 'although he made it sound 'easy' life was actually terribly hard for him – certainly after WW2. There was not much call for bespoke furniture then so he was competing against mass produced inexpensive products. He was working extremely hard and getting worn out – hence the accident to his fingers which led to the closure of his one man business 'The Industrial Productions'. He then went to work for his uncle as a commercial traveller in plumbing fittings, eventually taking over that business when his uncle retired. It wasn't until 1963 when Dad was 60 and mother 58 that they owned their own home and had some of the labour saving items that even then were taken for granted. I think that Dad survived the hard time because he was fortunately physically strong and free from illness and because psychologically he was and remains resilient'.

Further, Christina said in '2003, in his 100th year, he won the National 'Neighbour of the Year' award. He was in competition with nominees from all over the country so it was obviously a huge honour. Not long after, he won the City of Cardiff citizen of the century' award and this again was a great honour, although local rather than national'.

Edward's story

I am 106 today. I have just opened a card from Her Majesty the Queen. She sends one when you are 100 and then waits until you are 105. There is a card every year after 105.

I was born in Cardiff in 1903 and lived there until I was 101. I now live with my wonderful daughter, Christina, who is the youngest of my four children, and her husband in Norfolk. I am self-sufficient in a way, I do 'all the essentials' myself. I do like to stay in bed until 11am. I still like my red wine and I like going out. When I am home during the day I re-live some of my past, otherwise I look outside and watch the birds. I take some medications for my heart. This is all coal for the donkey.

I was only four; one of the things I remember on Bute Street was a main road going down to the docks. I saw King Edward Seventh and the Queen, Queen Alexandra. She was coming to Cardiff to open Queen Alexandra Docks. And people paid to look out of our window at the procession... to the Queen going by. It must have made an impression on me. I've got an idea it was in 1907, I may be wrong, but I know we had a big house on Bute Street with a shop at the bottom and two windows looking over the procession going down to the dock. It was a great procession, hundreds of horses, hundreds. Living in a docks town like that, you'd say it was a dull town; everybody going to work, no joy, no anything, no decoration, everything down to earth, a tough old place. But this was special. The territorial troops came to Cardiff to line the procession for the Queen. The streets were lined with the army making the guard all the way down. Cardiff was re-erected, it was a marvellous occasion. Of course, these troops had to be fed. They used the school as a base for their feeding and to relax and that's where I came in. I enjoyed every minute of it.

My mother was the caretaker of the schoolhouse where I was born. In those days the church was the first school, St. Mary's Church School. There wasn't an inch of the school that I didn't claim and climb. I had twelve brothers and sisters, there were in all seven girls and six boys, all born and vigorous. We had the school yard as playground and I enjoyed it. Aye, there you are. My mother was the caretaker of the St. Mary's but when the school was extended, mother's house, which was part of the school, had to move out. Then we went into 21 Bute Street, Cardiff. We saw everything that was going on there at that time and there was never a dull moment.

It was usual to have big families, but ours was unique because there were 13 born and 13 living. Plenty of families, I know of one family especially, which had 21 children, but only three survived. All died, it was a common thing. I remember mother used to bring in a washing lady, and I'd be holding the clothes for her to put on the line. And mother was congratulating the washer woman; I think she'd just had a baby. One of the things I remember the washer woman saying "I don't think I'll rear him". I remember, my God, she is expecting the baby to die and most babies did die; there was ignorance in those days about people. But we had 13 born and 13 living and this was a big credit to my mother. I'm the only survivor now. My sister, Elsie lived until she was coming up for 102.

Although we were a very big family, we had excellent nutrition. We had wonderful food. My mother was marvellous, made her own bread always, we were always properly fed. We kept chickens. We had 100 or so chickens in the back yard. It certainly wasn't a grand house, not by any stretch of the imagination but Dad had two allotments. Yes, we grew cabbage, cabbage, cabbage, lettuce and potatoes.

It was a very strict household. Well I was one of 13 and there had to be some regulations, things you should do, and things you should not. Mustn't go out with the girls, that's wrong, but of course we did.

We were all out to work, nobody was idle. Even when I was five my father expected me to empty the baskets in the school. At that time Father worked as a boilermaker, working on the Cardiff docks on a ship coming in and he was a driller, drilling holes in the metal ready for the rivets.

We had a shop below selling all sorts of things. It was clever; we sold packets of tea and sugar. Men going to work bought them, they'd have a screwed up spoonful of tea in the cup, a spoonful of sugar in a screw, I know, I helped to make the packets. And then at work, they'd be able to make a cup of tea for themselves with this packet of tea and sugar. Men walked or cycled by our house to work in the docks. There were no motor cars in those days.

I think I must have impressed the teachers because I won a scholarship to Howard Gardens Secondary School, which later became a Grammar school. It was a good school; I still remember most of what I was taught there. What else did I get out of school? I made a lot of good friends, had a lot of good fights. But I left school at about 14 as I was part of a large family and they needed support. I worked as an errand boy for a local greengrocer and then took up an apprenticeship. I went on to the tech to learn a trade as joiner and cabinet maker. It was a good education, to be an apprentice, starting five shillings a week.

I've worked all my life, every inch I'm sure. If you've got an engine and you don't use it, you'll rust it. I've never been lazy, I've always been adventurous. But in 1929 there was the Wall Street crash and not much work, so I started a ship fumigation business. I worked in the shipwrights' yard eventually. I was working on my own. At that time war was imminent and there was conscription of labour. If you were able and a certain age, you were conscripted. They direct you to go to work of national importance, so I was directed to ship repairers. I missed the wars. I was in a protected trade... important to the war effort. I remember one big job was to repair a sailing ship mast,

that was a terrific job, but they called on me to do it. After the war there was food rationing, and we had to work long hours... Around 1947 one night I had an accident, I took off two of my fingers with a circular saw.

I made a lot of things round Cardiff, like the Minion Buildings. I did a fair bit of work there but eventually I had my own business. Christina used to come down and help me. The business was called Industrial Productions, woodworking machinery, but Christina renamed it 'The Dusty Productions'! Work was my hobby; it came naturally, if you had to earn money that's the way to do it. I had great strength, I could do it and I enjoyed it.

I worked until I was over a hundred, quite a bit over a hundred. I worked in a workshop where I did woodwork - repair work and making models. I worked on a project to project basis. It was in Pendoylan, in the Vale of Glamorgan, that I made a spiral staircase. The staircase was for a well built house, but it had gone to wreck and ruin. We turned it back into a house. And I used to renovate antiques for Anne, the owner, who was in the antique business. She used to bring bits and pieces that wanted repairing. I'd repair them and make them look the same period. Yes, it was good fun. In the year 2000, there were two births in the family, so I made three cradles. I made them in such a way that they could be taken apart and packaged, one to go to New Zealand where one of my grandchildren lives, and the other one to go to Japan where another great grandson was born. I remember taking them to the post office, all packed up ready, big package, yes. I gave the third cradle to the lady next door.

In the 1990s when I was living in Heathwood Grove, I turned my garden into a playground. I put in swings and climbing ropes for the local children and I thought I was doing something good, it pleased me. The children on the street came in and they educated each other. The front doorstep was their parliament. I'd hear them talk. I used to encourage that and give them blankets to keep themselves warm on the front

doorstep. Children must have a place to talk, talk together, it's part of their growing up, part of their education. And they could talk outside or make a cup of tea inside if they wanted to. I'm sure it pleased the children. Yes I received a good neighbour award, that's right, but the children did it. They nominated me. It was in 2003, so it's not very long ago. The award reads 'Neighbour from Heaven Award'. But what I like is this mug which is engraved 'Thank you from all the children on The Grove, Uncle Edward'. It makes me feel that I haven't been useless.

Rusty? Not me! If you have a complicated piece of machinery and you didn't work it, it would rust and decay. The more we exercise the better we become. There you are, that's what's happened with me. I've never been idle, I've enjoyed doing big heavy work; I've made lots of things, trolleys and wagon bodies, wheels, everything that's made of wood. Yes the body is like a piece of machinery, if you don't use it, it will rust and decay.

CHAPTER 11

BOB

Born March 1908



Introduction

Bob had seen our centenarian study in an article in the Surrey Advertiser and when I called to make an appointment for the interview he had to consult his diary. Bob was born in Hull but thereafter lived in Tyneside, Taiwan, Japan, Canada and the USA. He explained how he actually lived and taught in different countries, learnt the languages and expected to stay there, but had to leave because of the war. Bob moved to Alton, in Hampshire in 1969 and has been there ever since.

Bob is the middle child of seven children. In fact, he said, his early memoirs published in 2009 were called 'We Were Seven' for that reason. These memoirs finish in 1946 but he is currently working on the later period. He said it was his family who kept on pressing him to write his memoirs. He also writes articles for the local church magazine, mainly on environmental matters – he said he is 'very much in the green movement'. Bob also does carpentry and makes his furniture. Bob has three children although, he joked, they are all over 70 so 'can hardly be called children now!' He has ten grandchildren and eleven great grandchildren.

Bob walks into town do to shopping and takes care of his own cooking. He is very independent. He said that as there is a nursing home on site, he won't need to move away if he gets to a point where he needs more care.

When the interview was over Bob made lunch for Tina, a bowl of soup and warm bread from the oven. This was very welcome and cosy, appreciated even more as it was freezing outside with snow was still piled up on the kerbs.

Bob's story

I was born in Kingston-Upon-Hull, on the east coast of Britain. Travelling abroad apart, if you ever went to Hull, Hull was the place you were going to because it didn't lead anywhere else (*both laugh*). So it was a very individualistic town with its own corporation and it ran its own telephone service and it produced its own electricity and had its own fishing fleet. We were the tops, we were independent, the rest of England came second, we didn't look up to London as the centre of British life and society, we thought London was full of bright young things, the upper classes and so on that we almost looked down on. We thought the upper classes, Southerners, were chinless wonders like Bertie Wooster in P G Woodhouse's novels. We had a fine opinion of ourselves I can tell you.

My father was born and brought up on a farm near Arbroath in Scotland and he was the youngest of nine, there were 20 years between my oldest uncle, Uncle Bob and my father, at the tail end of the family. My uncle, R L Weighton was the first Professor of Engineering in Newcastle University. He inspired me to do mechanical engineering. When I look back, I think I was extraordinarily fortunate in being a member of that family, although at the time, of course, I didn't think there was anything special about it whatsoever. But so many people have said they either had a very unhappy childhood or they had an ecstatically idyllic childhood, but mine was neither of those, it was just a very satisfactory one. And I had a marvellous lot of brothers and sisters, although we quarrelled just the same as any family. I had a very fortunate upbringing.

The oldest of the family was my big sister Bessie, and of course, the older one is nearly always labelled 'bossy', the one who orders all the others about. And the youngest one suffers from being left out of things or can't keep up with the others, so there are disadvantages and I suppose being in the middle, I did what I wanted. I know I was always known as the one who could not be found, I'd gone off somewhere

without telling anybody, and I must have caused my parents a bit of anxiety now and again, especially after I became the possessor of a bicycle and I could go miles off into the country and nobody knew where I'd gone to.

Independence, that was inculcated in us right from the very beginning because my father, having Scottish upbringing, thought that the Scottish educational system, which was for everyone not as it was in England, and the Scottish way of doing things was the best, proud, independent, and believing as Robbie Burns said 'a man's a man for a 'that'. This was impressed on us, not specifically in teaching, but the odd remarks and the observations that father made at the table, all inculcated this feeling that we were all autonomous, we were all worth something; and we could get anywhere if we worked hard. And nobody was, by right of birth, superior to anyone else.

In those days, there was an ethos that it was up to you to make your own way in the world, nobody else was going to offer you a cushy job or anything. It was up to you. And although some people had advantages, generally, it was up to you and the same was partly true of health; so long as you've got good food and you didn't do anything stupid, you should be healthy.

Herring and porridge! Being in a large fishing port, we ate a lot of fish, herring particularly. And now, everybody is saying that the herring is an extremely valuable source of all kinds of omegas. The fish was landed very early in the morning from the trawlers in the fish dock and within half an hour, there were men with barrows loaded with fish of all sort, particularly herring, going round the streets calling out "herring, two a' penny." Two a' penny and we often had them for breakfast because they were there and cheap. Our diet was partly purposely a good one and partly accidental because we were a middle class family and we could afford perhaps the fruit, which poorer families wouldn't get.

Although we were vaccinated, because that was about the first prophylactic process that came into being in the United Kingdom, we weren't given MMR as people are these days. We had mumps, we had chicken pox and we had rubella, and these were things that we were supposed to survive in childhood, and it was just too bad if you didn't. But they weren't regarded as killers, although lots of children must have succumbed to them.

I was 21 when I graduated from university. I didn't actually live in Hull thereafter, although I quite often came back to visit relatives. At 21, I went to Newcastle to work in a marine engineering works as an apprentice. It was a big change from being a middle class student to being an apprentice who could be teased and made fun of and generally made to carry tools around for other people. But I didn't suffer at all, I loved it. I accepted it. I wasn't an ordinary apprentice; the ordinary apprentice from a working class family would have left school at 14. He would have then got all kinds of little jobs like delivery boy for a baker or a butcher, working as a bootblack, polishing somebody's shoes in the street or any little job that he could find, until he was 16 when he was eligible start as a proper apprentice in an engineering firm. I was called a fitter, which was a skilled occupation, and being a graduate, I was starting at 21; they were starting at 16, so I was rather older. They couldn't pull my leg in the way that they could a 16 year old boy.

The major turning point in my life was the decision to go abroad and leave England. It was a big change to go abroad but if you recall, the 1930s were the worst part of the Great Depression in the inter-war years. I had become aware that the country was in depression and I was even more aware of it from a physical and visual point of view in Newcastle. When I first went there the engineering firms were very busy and there were about 2,500 men working in my shipyard. After two years service I noticed that the orders were dropping off. And I asked about being moved to the design office, but the apprentice supervisor took me upstairs and said "look in the drawing office" and it

was half empty. There was no prospect of any work there and over the last few months of my apprenticeship, I was being moved about from one place to another and men were being laid off right, left and centre. Even the apprentices were on short time, one week on and one week off, and it was very obvious to me that once I'd finished my apprenticeship, I was out on my ear.

It was the period of the Jarrow March, Well, things got so bad under the Baldwin government that workers from Jarrow, which was opposite Newcastle and also a highly industrialised area, were so despondent, so many of them were out of work, that they organised a march to London to present a petition to the Prime Minister. And it took them several weeks, but they were fed and watered and quartered in church halls, in schools, anywhere, and given food to eat. They arrived in London, but absolutely to no purpose; the streets of London had people with signs reading 'unemployed' on their backs or a placard, or were begging in the streets, and that was a sure sign to me that things were going to be very, very difficult.

I applied to many universities and technical institutions about a lectureship, but to no avail, although I might have got one eventually. Parallel to my interest in engineering was the political and religious side of my life. Politically, I was left wing after being brought up in a rather right wing family and after experiencing what it meant to be working class in Newcastle. Also, my family always had a connection with the church and I was well aware from reading newspapers that Fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany were going to be an increasing threat to the kind of liberties and freedoms that we enjoyed, and contrary to all the Christian principles that I had learnt. I was interested in world events and the position of a universal church in the world which was rapidly becoming one world, although people didn't talk about it as such in those days. I was aware of the place of the church and the international situation and what Christianity stood for in that context. I thought if I couldn't teach in England, maybe I could teach abroad and experience the universality of what I believed in. So I

approached various bodies and I discovered that there was a school in Taiwan which needed a teacher of English and Science and I thought 'my gosh, absolutely what I'm looking for'. And so I went to Taiwan when I was 25 in the autumn of 1933

When I was there, Taiwan was part of the Japanese empire and the language I had to learn was Japanese so I spent two years acquiring Japanese in Tokyo, which, at the end of that time, I spoke fairly fluently, and came back to Taiwan to continue my work in the school. Taiwan had been conquered by Japan in 1895 after a war with China. Now, after WWII, it was ceded back to China and the Japanese were all kicked out. The problem was that China had two governments, it had the Communist government under Mao Tse Tung and it had the Nationalist government under Chang Kai-shek, and they were battling it out in China as to who was going to rule the country. The allies decided everything, and they just backed Chang Kai-shek. But unfortunately Chang Kai-shek was defeated and after his defeat and the takeover of China by Mao Tse Tung and the Communists, he fled to Taiwan with the remnants of his army, much to the disgust of the Taiwanese because they were hoping that after the war, they would be able to govern themselves and be an independent nation.

The position of Taiwan at the present time is a very dicey one. There is a democratically elected government in Taiwan, not recognised by any other state and which cannot join the United Nations. But I'm in correspondence once again with people in Taiwan and I know Taiwanese people in Canada and the United States, many of whom have left the island for one reason or another.

I met Agnes at the training college before I went abroad and we became very much attached to one another after only a six month association in England. But I was contracted to go to Taiwan and she was contracted to go to an educational institution in Ghana, West Africa and we couldn't get married, or even engaged, unless we broke our contracts. In any case, there was a general rule applied to anyone going abroad,

either government or NGO, that you were not allowed to marry for two years, for the very valid reason that you were going to a situation of which you had no experience. And to have to cope with a new language, a new culture, a new job, a new everything, as well as a new wife, would amount to too much. I'm sure it came into force because there were many failed marriages, or people couldn't cope with their jobs, very sensibly in a way, although it sounds a bit dictatorial. So Agnes went to West Africa and I went to Taiwan full stop. We corresponded but, of course, in the absence of emails, it took six or eight weeks to write a letter and get a reply. But the association didn't diminish and we still felt that at some point we would get married. I was in Tokyo at the time when we decided to announce our engagement, but the question was, how do I get a letter asking her to marry me to West Africa or even to England, and get a reply. I had to wait about for two months, I could have sent a cable but that would have been very, very expensive and everybody would have known about it (*both laugh*).

When we decided to become engaged, the question was how to get a ring to the other side of the world. So I bought a ring in Tokyo and I happened to know the chief engineer on one of the P&O boats because he was the brother of one of my colleagues. I gave him the ring and he took it back to England and sent it by registered post to my father in Hull. When Agnes came to the end of her contract and returned to England, she went to Hull to see my father and meet my family for the first time. My father presented her with the engagement ring and a few months later Agnes booked a passage on a P&O boat as I had done, to come out for the wedding in Hong Kong. We were married in Hong Kong in 1937, four years after I'd seen her last.

Agnes had become quite fond of my father by that time as he was a widow: my mother had died about a year before. She thought my father was feeling the loss rather deeply, so she invited him to accompany her on the voyage to Hong Kong to attend the wedding. To my great surprise he agreed, as he regarded all foreign people and

countries as rather odd in their habits. He came with her and returned via Canada and had a wonderful time. When he got back to England, he was full of it and used to go round to meetings to give talks about his voyage round the world.

David, our eldest son, was born in Taiwan, but coming down to more modern times, as you will know, the war in Europe began in '39 and David was born in '38, that's right, he was 18 months old when we had to leave. Although Japan didn't come into the war and Japan and Britain were not at war until the attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941, everybody expected that if war came in Europe, Japan, as one of the Axis powers, (Germany, Italy and Japan) would automatically come into the war at the same time. But this did not happen: Hitler attacked Poland in September of '39 and the whole of Europe became engulfed in this war, but Japan did not enter the war at that point because they were hoping they would be able to solve the oil problem with the United States without having to go to war.

The British consul in Taiwan warned us that things were 'hotting' up in Europe and he thought it would be advisable for women and children to leave for Canada or somewhere as quickly as possible. I'd been there six years and the term of service was about seven, so I was more or less entitled to leave at the time, so we all caught a boat at Kobe and started to cross the Pacific Ocean towards Canada and eventually England. When we reached Hawaii, a notice was posted up everywhere that Hitler had marched into Poland and Britain was at war. And in preparation for the journey from Hawaii to Vancouver, which was the next port of call, the sailors were all out over the side of the boat, painting it grey.

We were zig-zagging at high speed to avoid submarines for the next several days, to get to Vancouver. When we got there, we enquired about crossing Canada and getting a boat at Montreal for England and they said, "don't be silly, there aren't any passenger boats going from Montreal to England anymore, all shipping has been

commandeered by the Ministry of War Transport and they are busy shipping children and women out of Britain anyway to Canada as fast as they can, nobody's going the other way" ... only troops and war supplies, food and stuff that Britain needed to prosecute the war.

So what to do, there we were with no job, nowhere to go, no friends. Well, we did have friends because we knew some Canadian people in Taiwan and they'd given us an address that we could go to, so we wired them and said, 'what shall we do? We can't go any further', and they said, 'come on to Toronto and we'll see what we can do after that'. So we got off at Toronto and we kept enquiring at the shipping office but they told us the same thing all the time, 'it's no good, you're not going to get to England until the war is over or things change'. And it didn't change because submarines were sinking boats in the Atlantic faster than anybody could build them, so we stayed in Toronto. We had no furniture, we had nothing but what we brought with us and we'd left a lot of things in Taiwan.

Agnes was seven months pregnant with our second child, so the second child was born in Canada and the third one too actually, all our three children were born abroad- they are all foreigners. The Canadian people were marvellous to us, they found us a flat, they provided us with furniture, they brought clothes for the babies and the children; they couldn't have been kinder. But eventually I had to find a job. I went back to engineering and was employed by the British Air Commission, supervising the delivery of aircraft engines and war material to the RAF from factories in Canada and America.

We've had to go to different churches every time we've moved, it has been very ecumenical. When people ask me about my church affiliation I say, "well, it's changed almost everywhere we lived" but even when I was a child, I was baptised in a Congregational church, I was confirmed in a Presbyterian church and I married a

Methodist (*both laugh*). The only things I haven't been are Roman Catholic and an Anglican I think. I don't pay much attention to denominations. And I happen to be Methodist now but that doesn't mean to say that I could not be happy being a Quaker or whatever. I don't think I could be in a church where they wanted you to say precisely what you are supposed to believe, and if it doesn't correspond with theirs, they say you're not a Christian. I've seen too many people, whether they thought of themselves as religious or not, whom I feel an affinity with, to be as narrow-minded as that.

There have been very many stressful situations, not knowing what was going to happen next and in fact, after the Canadian episode, because that was my job, I was posted to the United States, and for a long period Agnes and I were separated. I only got occasional visits back to Canada and eventually we decided that this couldn't continue - there wasn't any family life. I was approached when the outbreak of war with Japan became a reality by another branch of the British government which wanted people who knew Japanese to work in a radio monitoring and broadcast outfit in the United States and work alongside the Americans who had facilities on the West Coast, to broadcast to the enemy in Japan. I had to supervise the translation business. We were shifted from Hartford Connecticut to Denver. We had a year there and we were shifted again to San Francisco. My poor wife and the children were forever packing things up and moving house, from one rented place to another.

We lived in, I think, eleven different places or eleven different houses before we finally settled down in England to a long period of being twenty years in the same place. So it might seem as if we were constantly having our social network cut off, and being very stressful, but I have no recollection of feeling that this is the end of something. The only time when I really felt deeply moved and sad was when we left Taiwan. In spite of the fact that as foreigners, we were regarded by officials, police and every other Japanese... well, except our personal friends, as unwelcome guests

and quite literally, as spies for the British government. Even if we had been (spies), we knew nothing of any military value we could have told them. And it was difficult for the Taiwanese people to show friendship to someone who was regarded in that light, but nevertheless, when we left Taiwan, on the station there were hundreds of Taiwanese friends who came to say goodbye.

And I felt almost as if we were leaving them to their fate because one of them said to me months before that, “we have nowhere to go, we’re ruled by the Japanese and there’s nowhere to go. You can go home to England”. We had an escape route, but they had nowhere to go.

And I don’t know what they were thinking when we left, that was one of the hardest things we ever had to do. I think they knew very well what was going to happen eventually and that we would have to go. In the end, the other foreigners had to go and none of them were caught in Taiwan, but four women colleagues left at the last minute and went to Singapore where they thought they would be safe. Of course they weren’t, no. These four women were caught leaving Singapore and they were evacuated to a prisoner of war camp on one of the islands offshore, formerly the Dutch East Indies. And only one of them survived the war, and came back. The three others died of Beri - Beri or some other tropical disease for which there was no treatment, no medicine.

The experience of leaving one place for another, sometimes by choice, but more often because that was what I had to do, was something I learnt to cope with. Well, *we* learned to cope with. My wife was the same in that respect because she’d left home and family and everything to go to Ghana. I have respect for her because she was someone who gave up her life work to be with me. (*Long pause*). I was always aware of that. I know a lot of women were restricted, I know a lot of women didn’t have the opportunities and so on, but it wasn’t that there weren’t women who carved out what they wanted. On occasions, when the children were all in school, she went back to

teaching. It was always *we*, it was always *we*, who did things and decided things together.

If I could wish for anything now it would be that my wife was still alive. (*Long pause*) It was '95 that she died, 15 years. She was not as lucky as I was, she had very severe arthritis for the last 20 years or so, but of course that's not a killer disease, I think it was heart failure in the end.

I have a capacity for withdrawing into myself and letting the world go by and this may have something to do with my being the middle one of a large family because I already had, as a child, a capacity to withdraw in childhood with a book, to a corner in a very busy house where everything was going on. And I could be lost to that world in a book, sitting in a corner behind the sofa, reading and everybody would say, "Where's Bob? Where's Bob? Come on, what are you doing there?" But I had a capacity for retreating, if you like, psychologically, to a place where I was alone and I didn't have to worry about what was going on outside. It's not easy for other people being like that, because you can retreat into your little nook when other people want you to be there for them and I'm sure my wife suffered from that habit of mine. With strangers, of course, it doesn't matter so much because you can socialise with them when you choose, but if you're married and you've got children, you need to be there all the time. So yes, I suppose it helped me to cope with what could have been stress, but I could easily say "well, there is nothing about this situation that I can do. I can't alter the fact that Japan has invaded or attacked Pearl Harbour. So I don't need to worry about it because it's not my business."

What is important? Nothing that is important to somebody else or to other people. There are people in these flats who can't bear to part with the furniture they've lived with for the last 70 years, but if you look round in my own flat, there isn't anything that's worth tuppence. I once told our minister that looking back, I never wanted to

possess anything for the sake of owning it. It was nice having a suit, you're expected to wear a suit when you go places, so that's why I have a suit, but otherwise I wouldn't have a suit at all. I don't know where this comes from. It might be a bit of Quaker influence that I was always interested in seeing how little I could manage on. It could be interpreted by somebody else as being mean, but I've tried not to apply it to my family. I would walk anywhere and never take a taxi but when my wife got arthritis I realised, you can't be selfish, you've got to pay for a taxi. But I'm quite happy to see my budget decreasing; I suppose I'm a bit odd that way. And half of the things in this room I made myself out of nothing (*laughs*), odd bits of wood, so I've no ambitions to own anything. We had to leave everything, oh, lots of stuff, we were forever buying second-hand furniture and then leaving it behind.

Books are a different matter (*banging the table*). Books are a different matter, I'm not going to get rid of my books, I don't care where I go. Do you know *Henry V*?

By Jove, I am not covetous for gold, nor care I who doth feed upon my cost; it yearns me not that men my garments wear; such outward things dwell not in my desires, but if it be a sin to covet books, I am the most offending soul alive.

Because he didn't say 'books', he said *if it be a sin to covet honour, I am the most offending soul alive*. So I just have to substitute books.

CHAPTER 12

PHYLLIS

Born August 1908



Introduction

In this interview with Phyllis talks about her life since her husband died thirty years ago. Tina noticed that the word stress is not in her vocabulary, in fact she describes herself as resilient. After her husband died she founded a bridge club in Eastbourne. Her conversation is about bridge and it was clear that the bridge club is Phyllis' life. She still teaches and plays bridge four times per week. She lives alone, independently in her own flat.

Her major concern is her loss of eye sight. Although she jokes about not being able to see the electrical cord while she mows the grass in her garden, she then laughingly queries whether running over it might bring about her death.

Phyllis's story

I've had a very normal life quite honestly. My father was in the army so of course my mother travelled with him. We had the four of us in the family and we were all born in different places; my eldest brother was born in England, I was next, born in Gibraltar, another sister was born in Bermuda and another one in South Africa. That's the start of our life.

I enjoyed being in South Africa - in Johannesburg and Pretoria and places like that. I can still remember the South Africans making the bead necklaces they used to sell. I remember the way it used to rain there, you had very hot weather but when it rained it just tipped down! I think we were just very free and easy because we used to mix with the African children quite a bit.

While we were in South Africa the war broke out and then we had to come back home. I was only six or seven but we were lucky to be alive because at the beginning of the war we were sent home in a troop ship - we had a torpedo following us and we could have been blown up. It was a relief to get home but I was quite young then. I think I just enjoyed being on the ship.

Unfortunately my father was killed in the war. I did see him a bit; he did come home on leave once but not for very long. He won a medal which my brother had to go and be presented with. That was that.

My mother had to try and bring us up by herself. We went to school at the convent at Bedford, South England. I was there until I was about 17 or 18. I had quite a long education and I did quite well, I was a captain of the tennis and I was quite good at maths. I did painting too and I started the violin but that didn't last very long (*laughs*). Well, mother managed very well. My father was an officer by the time he died so she

got a fair pension and our school fees were paid for by the government. No, I think we all did quite well really, we just took it in our stride I suppose. You have to, don't you!

I got married quite young, I was barely 21 when I married John. He went in the army, he had to go abroad like the rest of them but fortunately he came back safely. He went soon after the Normandy D-Day landing, he went across then and he actually saw the reliefs of Auschwitz. He wouldn't talk about it; he wouldn't say anything about it at all, no. But it must have been pretty horrible. He was in the army that was freeing Holland. I've got a medal over there from Tilburg that they presented to him, for helping to free the Dutch from the Germans.

When my husband was called up I went back to Bedford to stay with my mother. We used to dig for victory. We all took allotments and grew our own vegetables. I had two children to look after, my mother who was blind, and I was working at the town hall as well, and then I was doing this allotment and keeping chickens in the garden (*laughs*). All the women worked at that stage.

When the war finished we came back here to Eastbourne and bought a house in Victoria Drive. We got the children settled in school before my husband went back to work, John was manager of the Royal Exchange Insurance Company. We just led a normal life after that.

We were married for 50 years. John died when we'd just had our golden wedding. He had a heart attack. John was one of those people that always got something wrong with him, but he never really had anything wrong with him! Yes, he was one of those that always wanted to be at the chemist, buying a pill for this and a pill for that and he'd really got nothing wrong with him at all, never had anything. Well then, because I used to say to him, I said "one day, you're going to be ill and I'm not going to know

it and I won't take any notice". And that's just what happened. He said "I've got a pain in my chest," but he'd had so many pains through his life and they never turned out to be anything. Then three days later, he said "I've still got that pain." "Well" I said "if you've got the pain, we'll have to have the doctor." So we called the doctor who gave him some tablets to put under his tongue. And before he got back to the surgery, John had had a massive heart attack. You see, he had been calling wolf too long, it's exactly what I said would happen; I just didn't take notice quickly enough unfortunately. But really I couldn't do anything about it because it's what he was like all his life. We'd had 50 years together and he'd never really been ill at all, never really been ill.

I have not felt stressed in my life except when my husband was ill because when he had that heart attack he was resuscitated. He was almost like a cabbage for one month. I think they were very foolish to bring him round when he had died. If I'd known they were going to do that, I would have said no because I think it was so degrading. He was in hospital and somebody across the ward called me over and they said "is that Mr. ... over there?" I said "yes, it is." And he couldn't believe it because he'd gone downhill so far. I think that's most degrading when you've been a manager in a place, don't you? Much better to just drop off as you are, I think. Twice they tried to bring him round because I went to see him in the hospital and was waiting in the outside area before they let you go in the wards and he was rushed by on a trolley then. And he'd gone and they resuscitated him again. Well I think that was absolutely cruel, I think it's cruel. Then he came home for month and he just died on the settee.

Well you just have to cope with it, don't you? I'm afraid I'm one of those resilient people, I don't just sit down and cry when it comes, I've just got to get on with it. You know full well it's probably the end and you think your life is going to change but you've just got to go on. And I think it's just living sensibly quite honestly. What

have the other centenarians put their life down to? Yes, you've just got to get on with it; you've just got to get on with it.

It took me about four years after he died before I sold the house and came to this flat. Since then, I've lived on my own. I've done all my own work, my own decorating. I've got a huge garden at the back and I've done the entire garden until late last year. Now it's got to the stage where I just can't see things unfortunately, and it's a bit dangerous. People used to say, "You're never cutting the grass?" I said "I am" because I've got quite a big lawn out the back there, it's almost as big as a tennis court. I daren't do it now because I can't see the flex and I'm afraid I might run the machine over it and then I should blow myself up, not that it would matter, would it? (*Both laugh*).

After my husband died I started up a bridge club. I had to keep going. There were two bank managers and we all had to put money in that first club. Together we converted an old building. But we got the money back within two years. We got the members together and different people gave the trays, some gave some china and some did the tablecloths. It was quite a challenge, quite a challenge, but it was very good actually. We had 20 years in that particular building and then the membership got too big, so now we've taken the top floor of the RAF club in the other road. And we've got a very nice club. We've now got between 300 and 400 members. We use two big rooms there so that we can have competitions in one room. We have a lot of big Sussex competitions in there too.

I play at the bridge club four days a week: Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday. And then if there's a competition, I play in that as well. We've got some members that are very good actually, they're better than I am now, and the person that really put you in touch with me for the interview is one that I taught bridge. Well, a few people keep coming to me but I'm getting to the stage where it's getting quite

difficult to get cards ready, I shall soon have to say “I’m afraid you’ve had it” but they just don’t want to give up, they like coming, that’s the point. When playing bridge you use your grey matter, that’s the point, you’re competing and you’re doing something, you’re going out, you’re meeting people. It’s a wonderful thing for people as they get over... well over, what, 60 I should think.

Also, I don’t drink a lot, I have a glass of wine if I go out for a meal but I’m not one that must have a glass of something every night. I live on chocolate (*both laugh*). They say chocolate is no good for you and yet the other day in the paper I read something about chocolate being good for your heart. A little bit? Oh, mine’s not a little bit, mine’s a lot! I do love chocolate. I like fruit and I think I’ve lived fairly healthily really because, you see, during the war; we grew our own vegetables and things so that we had to eat those. I’m not a big meat-eater. I go out with some friends on a Saturday night when we’ve finished at the bridge club, we go to the fish and chip shop. We’ve got a very nice local fish and chip shop.

I don’t think I’ve had what I’d call an exciting life, but there’s been quite a lot of things, drama and that, in it, different things, what with my father being killed and then my husband going to the war and my brother being killed and things like that. But then again, you’re left and you’ve got to get on and that’s it. I think hard work does a lot for you. I think you’ve just got to plod on.

Except for my eyesight, I’m quite happy as I am, quite happy as I am. And as I say, I loved doing my garden and that until I couldn’t see it- that’s the sad part - and I just hoped that they would eventually, as the sight got worse, they would operate, but they said no. They said the glaucoma’s done too much damage to the eye that it’s too dangerous. If they did the procedure the risk is that I might not have any sight at all. Whereas at the moment, I can see the room, I can see the furniture round it but if I drop something, I’ve got a hard job to find it then, things like that. I don’t know, I

don't know what the answer is quite honestly. I don't know, it's just one of those things, unfortunately, we don't know what the end is going to be, do we? You just have to take things as they come and get on with it, and live what I call a '*normal life*', not an extravagant one. Yes, except chocolate (*both laugh*), that's right.

CHAPTER 13

ALEX

Born December 1909



Introduction

It was a cold blustery day in late March when I (Pam) went to Currie by bus, just outside Edinburgh to meet Alex. I got off the bus too early and spent awhile finding my bearings until I rang Alex to confirm directions which he gave me with policeman's precision and clarity. Alex has lived in his house with a view of the Pentland Hills, since 1950 when he moved back to Scotland from London after serving 25 years in the Metropolitan Police Force. Alex mentioned he used to go walking in the Hills with his friends when they were youngsters which conveyed a sense of really deep roots in and connections with the area. He had moved back to Currie with his wife and one daughter because his wife wanted to be near her mother. Once the formal interview was over Alex commented that 'I haven't much of a story to tell. I've nothing extraordinary.' He then unassumingly mentioned that he had been commended nine times for bravery while working in the Met. Alex had many photographs and awards on display including his card from the Queen and one from the Lord and Lady Provost of Edinburgh. Alex was clearly a distinguished and respected member of a number of communities and he had photographs of and awards from: the Metropolitan Police Alumni – he mentioned there were five of them - all achieving 100 about the same time, the Masons and his Bowling Club. He thought there were no secrets to successful ageing – just luck, sheer luck. In the previous November 2009, he was asked to lay the wreath on Armistice Day at the local War Memorial. Alex had lost brothers during that war. Alex was happy to engage with the present and when we talked about the town near Thames Ditton in Surrey which was close to the Metropolitan Police Sports ground and the Headquarters of the Amateur Football Association (he had been an active football organiser and player) it took the whole of the interview for us to finally remember the town of Kingston as the place. We both laughed and felt a sense of achievement. Alex connected with the fact I worked at the University of Surrey, in Guildford and travelled on the same commuting line that he had travelled in the 30s and 40s. He could still remember all the stops. Alex maintains

his strong connections with the Bowling Club, the Masons and the Met, sees his family daily and listens to talking books. He was currently listening to a detective story and his passion for solving problems remains undiminished.

Alex story

I was born in Edinburgh and I was there until I was 23 when I went to the Met. I have great memories of growing up 'cos I played a lot of sports, you know, football and things, then of course, cricket and golf, tennis, then the Boys Club, table tennis, billiards, snooker, all that. We always liked to think we were the YMCA, although we weren't tied to any one church, we used to go and visit different churches. Oh aye, I enjoyed that, great fellowship, great friendship with the men.

My wife came from Edinburgh as well. We met locally at the Boys' Club. I was one of the head ones there, the Head Prefect. I organised the dances and we met there and we soon married after I went to the Metropolitan Police. We both liked to dance and we got married in the Plaza Ballroom in Morningside, aye. We had one daughter Jennifer and she is aged 60.

Well the most important event for me was getting married. It really was in my case. I mean lots of men would say otherwise, (*laughs*) but that honestly was my best thing I ever did. And uprooting myself from Edinburgh and going away to London and then making a home and getting married. And I had a good marriage, a very good marriage, yeah. You see, I had my mother die when I was only 14. She was about 40 and she had a stroke. So we didn't have a mother in the house and it was something new for me. Well my sister kept house for us and my father just soldiered on until 1957, he died then. He must have been about 80. I had two brothers and one sister. One brother was eight years younger than me. He died in about 1990. And all the others were older than me. My elder brother, he got killed in a motor accident in London in the year of the war, 1939.

My main job was in the Metropolitan Police, I was a police officer there. I went to the Met because it was difficult to get jobs, lasting jobs, you know, work was very slow,

unemployment was very rife at that time. I enjoyed it, I did 25 years there. Of course, policemen, they come and go because some of them only do 25 years, some do 30 years and are never back in London again. They go back to their home town and live there.

Well, first I was in what they call the section for single men. Anyway, when I got married, we lived in Peckham and then later we moved back to Camberwell quarters in Camberwell Police Station. Then we moved to Brentford, 'cos I was made up to sergeant and moved to Acton Magistrates Court in West London. Then we moved to Greenford where we bought a house. My wife made a deposit of ten shillings down for the house, that's about two thousand pounds to raise a deposit of ten shillings. When we were in Greenford, it was about 16 miles from London, and you had that there and back every day. I was a commuter. The trains were always busy.

I was in Soho for 14 years, so I saw a few things there, with the wild women. Oh indeed, oh yes. I finished up in charge of the court, station sergeant, three stripes and a crown and I was in charge of the court, Marlborough Street Magistrates Court in Soho. And that's how I met all the wild women. Well, there were lots of cases came before the court, murder cases and things like that, and they had drunks by the dozen and prostitutes by the two dozen. I was also the jailer at Marylebone Magistrates Court and if you didn't have 20 girl prostitutes appearing before the Court that was a poor day. Oh, easy, aye. They got fined about forty shillings, two pounds; that was a maximum for that offence, yes. And they kept coming back, some every day. Aye, most of them had lots of convictions.

We were in London all the time through the '39/45 War. It was terrible. We actually got bombed one night we were in the shelter, but some of the slates on my roof, they all blew off, and of course, we had to get that all repaired otherwise we'd get all the rain coming in. And I lived through the First World War as well. I lost about five

uncles; they were all killed in the army. There used to be bombs then as well, but not nearly as bad as the Second World War in London. You were bombed every night practically and sometimes during the day as well, daylight bombers.

Well, like a good first aider, you always looked after yourself. It's no good being a dead policeman. You're no use to anybody. So everybody used to take shelter until the bombing was over unless there was bombing and you were called out to rescue the people. Many of my colleagues got decorations for that, aye, especially the miners, they could climb underground, under houses and things like that. Oh yes, the mining community came into their own then. All the men who had been miners and were now in the police covered themselves with glory every time there was a bombing raid. Oh yes, that was one of the great things about it. There were a lot of miners in the police. They were from all over, Scotland, England, Ireland, Wales. They gave up their mining and joined the police, which they always thought was a better job. They could go rummaging through under houses, oh yeah. And Camberwell Green got a direct hit and there was about a couple of hundred people in the shelter and some of them got killed, a good few of them got killed.

I used to play football in what they call the Surrey Senior League and used to play in all the towns in Surrey We used to travel every Saturday, and play a different team in the county. This was from '34, '35, '36, before the war and then came the war and that spoiled everything.

There's quite a big football ground in Kingston, near Thames Ditton. Sport was very important to me and I've played, when I was fit enough and young enough, then I got into the organising as well which entailed finding a team, organising their games, their fixtures and things like that. The police all had football teams you see, uhuh. Aye, and it was a big ground, aye and we had played there many times. I actually played in the semi final of the English FA Amateur Cup at Wimbledon in 1935. We lost 2-0 to

Dulwich Hamlet, they were our local rivals. Yeah, they won the cup. We never got the opportunity again, we weren't good enough; it took a lot then to get to the semi final. But Kingston was a good place, a nice big place too as far as I can remember. I used to go on the train to Thames Ditton from Vauxhall, Clapham Junction, Earlesfield, Wimbledon, Raynes Park, Malden, Berrylands, Surbiton, Thames Ditton, Hampton Court. Hampton Court was the end of the line. The actual football club was known as Imber Court. You get out of the train at Thames Ditton and walk straight along about a couple of hundred yards and you see Number 1, The Street, Metropolitan Police Football Ground, facing you as you come off the train. And I heard from one of my police colleagues who keeps in touch with me, that it's all been renovated and re-done and it's improved a lot. He took a lot of photographs that I had and he's put them up in the lounge. My wife and I went there to visit to see what it was like.

I've never travelled out of the country at all. I've never been one for Spanish holidays or things like that. Aye, I've been to lots of places in Scotland, we used to go on holidays in Scotland, places we hadn't been before. Oh, we used to like going on holidays to the north of Scotland. Nairn is a nice place and Inverness.

After I left the police, I went into the off-licence business. We had an off-licence in Bushey in Hertfordshire (*pauses*). Then we were still there when we made the move back to Edinburgh. My wife wanted to come back, she'd been an Edinburgh woman and her mother and father were still alive at that time, so we decided to come back. Anyway, we bought this house near the Pentland Hills in 1959. My wife was a very clever shop assistant. She worked for a while with the Co-operative, a big store in Bridge Street. And my daughter went to the School at the top of the road which is closed now and they're selling the property.

I got a job at the Brewery on the other side of the town in the stocktaking department. Then I soon became the head stock taker. There was a lot of work to be done, taking

stock round the pubs. You see, I was used to handling money in the courts when I was a jailer at Marylebone Magistrates Court. You collected all the fines and there's a lot of money each day to collect, and over the course of the year, there were thousands of pounds of fines. You had to be very careful. And stocktaking was very demanding, oh yes, you had to make sure all the pubs were making a profit.

And I do bowling, green lawn bowls, I was very much involved in that. I'm still the Honorary President of my bowling club up here and I have been for 25 years. I was President in '65 and '66 and then, of course, I was on the committees and I was actually the bar auditor for 22 years which like stocktaking I made sure the bar made a profit.

My daughter Jennifer is with a solicitor in the town, in Edinburgh, aye. And she comes on a Tuesday and a Thursday and Saturday and Sunday and we go out on Saturday and Sunday, we go out for lunch to a local pub at Juniper Green. She's away from her husband, she's not divorced, and she lives with her partner. We go out and then we do some shopping at Tesco at Colinton, then we go back to the bowling club for an hour or two. Then on a Sunday, we go out to the bowling club for a couple of hours as well, meet up with all our old friends. It's important you keep up with your old friends, you know.

My grandson has got four children and my granddaughter has got two, I enjoy seeing the kids, they're good fun. They're all youngsters under four years of age, six of them. And that takes a bit of doing and when they're all here, I'm glad when they go! Paul, my grandson, he's in the fire service, a fire fighter. He's in the place of the son I never had. He was in the Royal Navy for about 12 years before he joined the fire brigade. And Debbie, my granddaughter has got two children. She's in the motor trade, with Volkswagen. She has depots in Stirling and she travels there every day. She lives in Eskbank, the other side of Edinburgh.

Living to be a hundred only means that a lot of people know you better, that's the way I find it here, there are a very few people who are a hundred here in this area. And I'm in the bowling club, I'm in the Masons and there are no people a hundred there. So that makes it a bit unusual.

When I celebrated my 100th birthday I had over 110 people who came to the bowling club, all my friends, the few relatives I have, members of the bowling club, members of the Masons and old working colleagues. I had a telegram from the Queen. It says 'I'm so pleased to know you are celebrating your 100th birthday on the 16th of December'. Then I've got a card from the Lord and Lady Provost of Edinburgh and from the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and I got an award. It was sent to me, from the Police, it's a bronze statue of a policeman holding a child and it has my name and warrant number on it. I still remember the number. There were five of us from the Met who appeared in the last magazine who had reached the hundred mark.

Then I got another award from the bowling club; that was for 50 years membership and another one for being a hundred, I got that from the bowling club as well. That's what they call a quaich. It's supposed to be a good luck sign. Aye, and then I've got one from the Grandmaster Mason of Scotland.

There are no secrets to living to be a hundred as far as I'm concerned, I don't think there are. It's just luck, sheer, sheer luck. That's what I think, honest I do. I mean you think of the young people that have died and passed away. I've been ill from time to time, but I've never had anything, touch wood, nothing very serious. It's nothing that I've done in particular that's made me live longer than anybody else or most people. If there was something that I'd done that had kept me alive, I would know. I used to smoke. But I have nae smoked for about 25 years. I used to like smoking a pipe, but then of course, smoking I don't think does you any good at all. Well, I eat good food

and I eat quite a lot of food really, yeah. I don't like to feel hungry (*laughs*). I've kept fit, I will say that much, I kept fit, I like to keep fit. I still do the exercise where you raise the foot. I suppose a lot of people would like to live longer than they do, but you've got no control over that, have you? So I enjoy thinking back on a lot of the things that a lot of people wouldn't have the luck to do.

I like to be on my own, I've been on my own so long now that I'm used to it. Well, I listen to the (audio) tapes and have the telly on, but I can't see the telly because of my sight, but I can follow when they're describing something, I can follow that. Well, I've got some sight that I can see enough to cook food and things like that. I've got a microwave oven, it's through in the kitchen. The family leave food ready for me, it just needs heating up. My daughter's partner comes every day on his way home from work; he comes in about half past three.

If I could wish for one thing now, well, I mean that's rather a personal thing, but I suppose it would be to have the wife back. But if she had lived the same time as me, we would both have been struggling (*laughs*). She was only three years younger than me, aye. So it's important to me just to try and have good health, keep good health, keep going.

CHAPTER 14

MARION

Born March 1908



Introduction

I (Pam) met Marion towards the end of one of Scotland's longest and hardest winters in recent history. Marion had not been deterred by the snow and ice living snugly in her house in Juniper Green amidst the family and community she loved, watching the snowdrops come up in the same spot as they did every year. I was captivated by Marion's connection through her parents to the Islands of Skye and Orkney, her father's wearing of the kilt, the Gaelic language and her love of dancing whether it was Scottish Country Dancing or the Charleston. Marion's sense of fun was evident in her story of going to a dance on her last visit to Skye, her father's birthplace. The dance had been organised on board ship by a group of visiting naval officers and Marion enthusiastically began to dance the Charleston. But she was promptly told to stop so as to avoid 'kicking someone in the legs'! So Marion and her friends had to be content with dancing the more sedate waltz. On many other occasions Marion danced the Dashing White Sergeant, the Sword dance or the Highland fling.

Marion also talked about the travel, sport and a sense of adventure which she had enjoyed throughout her long rich life and although she recalled past events with clarity she was also very much living in the present. She was very aware of the strength and reliability of the care workers who defied the snowy weather to dig themselves a path through the heavy snow drifts on their daily visits. She commented 'you wouldn't catch men going to that sort of trouble'. Marion sang, fed the birds, went with her family for meals at the local golf club where they were all members. She was confident that her talented golfing granddaughter would pass the skill and confidence on to her great granddaughter so that someday she might play for Scotland's national team. Marion was surrounded by beautiful embroideries, decoupage and samplers of lace, and her one regret, was that she could no longer do the fine needlework and crochet which she had loved to do because her lace making

fingers had taken severe arthritis. She reflected 'I did all these things, that was my gift, my hands'.

Marion believed in the power of prayer to work miracles and she had seen her sight improved. She also told me. I don't think of death, I just think of living and what I'm going to do and what I'm going to enjoy.

Marion's story

I was born on the 6th of March 1908 in Edinburgh. My father was in the general post office at the east end of Princes Street, and he came to Edinburgh from the post office in Skye. My mother was a lady's maid and she came to Edinburgh, from Orkney likely with the boats, and they met in Edinburgh at one of the cèilidhs or one of the clan dances, that's what they had in the old days. And then they got married and stayed in Harrison Road all their days till they died.

I went up to Orkney when I was 17. We had to go from Leith to Aberdeen to Kirkwall and then get another boat at Kirkwall out to Westray where mother's family stayed. It took three days. And once I started working we had the holidays nearer home at Aberdour and Kinghorn and different places.

My mother died suddenly in her 60s. She was taken to hospital and had an operation, but didn't get over it. Father died when he was 72. He said when he retired, he would buy a nice wee pony and trap and drive about the country roads but because mother died about ten years before him, that put paid to that.

One of the first things I remember is when I took scarlet fever. We were at Lossiemouth on our holidays and we were down on the beach and oh, there was a dog washed up, it was dead and I think we got the germs off the dog. Anyway, when we came home, my sister Marie took scarlet fever and she was in the City Hospital, and then just after a fortnight, I was in the City Hospital too. We were there six weeks. My mother had to take the tram to the Happy Valley, that's on Colinton Road and she had to walk all the way up to the Hospital.

When you took your clothes off you'd always to shake them and flatten them down and have them nice on the table beside you. And ever since then, Marie and I always did that to our clothes. As soon as we'd take them off, we'd put them together and fold them and put them on the chair. I still do that. I'll shake my nightie and then I'll take the tail up and then fold it on top. That's what they expected when you were in the hospital.

And I remember my bed, it was right beside a window, and you could see the Craiglockhart Hill. And I saw a soldier on the top of the hill and that was the start of the war, the 14-18 war. I remember seeing the Zeppelin in the sky, and we had a cellar under the hall stair and we used to go down to the cellar. I would be only six at the start of the war. Well, I remember going down to a friend's house, we were in flats you see, but they had a villa just down from us. He was a banker. He said to come down and we were in their living room and they had a table and under the table was a basin full of water in case a bomb came through the roof (*laughs*).

I went to a private school until I was about nine and then I went to James Gillespie's in Bruntsfield. I played in their hockey team. I've still got a bump on my foot with the hockey ball; it swells up now and again. I'd taken a course on the commercial side, bookkeeping. And then when I left at 16, I got a job in McVitie and Price on Robertson Avenue and I was in the cashier's office there. And oh, I liked doing bookkeeping and shorthand. So once I started in the office, I said to the girls "anybody like to play golf?" They said "yes, we'd like to." "Well", I said, "what about going down at half past six in the morning, there'll be sheep on the course, but that doesn't matter." Well, there was five of us went down and we would play nine holes and the sheep were there grazing; you'd hit a sheep but they'd never feel the ball.

And then we hurried home and got changed and went to work. Then at night time we would get the train at Gorgie Station and it took us right round to Portobello, Morningside, Craigmillar, Piershill, right round to the saltwater baths at Portobello, and then likely have chips on the way home. And I used to go to the Turkish baths on Warrender Road once a week. Bert, my husband, would take me and another lady and then her husband would bring us home. Oh the Turkish baths were good, you felt clean after them. In these days, you just sat on wooden boards and it was the steam that opened all your pores and they also had a cold water spray, so you were in and out, in and out so that was lovely. And I also played tennis and hockey and badminton.

I met my husband playing tennis. We had a lovely wedding in the church at the top of Harrison Road and the reception in the Morningside Dance Hall, the Plaza. And then we went down to the railway station and many of the people at the reception came down. So we went to a wee place beside Llandudno, Rhyl, for our honeymoon.

Bert played for the Hearts in Edinburgh, just for extra money and he enjoyed playing so much. He knew the manager of Hearts and he said “come down to Hearts Bert and we’ll give you a game”. He was a good footballer, yes, and he played for the Heart of Midlothian. He was four years with Hearts and they wanted him to play full-time but my husband wouldn’t give up his work, but Leith Athletic were wanting some players and one of the directors says “we’ll get you a job if you come and play for us.” The Hearts wouldn’t take him on because he couldn’t get off on a Saturday to play an away game. So he went to Leith Athletic and he was there for four years and they won the cup, they won the cup at the Hearts too while he was playing. So he just enjoyed playing football and he played golf too. He was with a coal company then for the

Hearts, but when Leith Athletic took him on, the director, got him a job in the City Chambers, giving out licences to people for their cars and different things.

I worked for 12 years before I got married. But they didn't take on married people in those days, because you would be wanting off for your family if they were ill or something. And I didn't work after I was married. Some of my neighbours even though they were married didn't want to have a family so they just kept on working.

I remember we went to Orkney in 1949, to St. Magnus Cathedral, in Kirkwall and to Shapinsay. Marie went up with her two boys and we stopped off at Aberdeen, but the boat left again at four o'clock, and my husband and Brian and Doreen went into the maze at Hazelhead and couldn't get out and I had to get the man at the door to guide them out because we had to go back to the boat for the four o'clock sailing. And Marie's two boys went to the pictures and they saw the picture but sat on to see it again and Marie had to get their names put up on the screen (*all laugh*). "Archie and Ian, come out, the boat sails at four o'clock".

I was a member of the Kingsknowe Townswomen's Guild and I was their treasurer for over 10 years. We used to have coffee mornings and we were always baking and would sell it and get money for the church or for the Townswomen's Guild. If you tasted something you liked you'd ask 'who baked this?' and you would get the recipe. So that's what we did. And I had good woman friends. We arranged different holidays so that the wives could go. My husband wasn't keen on flying so he let me go with the Guild. We went to Switzerland and Vienna and Oberammergau and to Holland to the bulbs ... oh, before you got near the bulbs, you could smell them. It was good fun. And we came down the Danube to Vienna, and by the time we got there it was evening and we went into the theatre. The play was all in German, so there we were,

dead tired, sitting up in the gods, falling off to sleep, listening to *The Magic Flute*. We had to look down at the stage but at halftime, we went out and there was a flat roof and we could look round Vienna and see all the lights. And then they had a beer garden and they were playing all the lovely tunes that you could dance to, so we were in there dancing.

I've always liked dancing. The last time I went to Skye I was in Portree when a wee boat came in with sailors, officers who put on a dance at night time and I was there dancing the Charleston. They had to stop us doing it. They said: "oh, we don't allow the Charleston you'll maybe kick somebody on the legs!" (*Laughs*) So it had to be just a waltz. And I could do the Highland Fling and the Sword Dance and the "Dashing White Sergeant" and the other country dances.

I've always been healthy and enjoyed exercise and swimming, it's all good fun and I feel I'm never idle. I never was till I took arthritis. I used to crochet for Africa and for the children at Kinross and Loch Lomond, Rachel House, the Children's Hospice. I'm finding it harder now when the days are dark and cloudy and I can't crochet. These two fingers, that kept my holding onto the lace, I can't do that now, I haven't the strength and oh, I'm so sorry that I can't crochet. I've always crocheted, knitted, made my own clothes, made clothes for my husband, I did all these things, that was my gift, my hands. And I always had pins or a crochet hook or sewing. No bother to do it, I loved doing it. My mother started me off and then I got sewing at school. I made a beautiful evening dress, pink and white, oh, it was just lovely, and that was all hand done. I used to go to classes if I wanted to find out how to do a thing, I went to a knitting class or a crochet class or I went to a class for decoupage and what not. With my husband when he was alive, I used to go the picture house in Lothian Road, they put on shows about other countries and it was so interesting to hear what was going on there.

And I had my two sisters and a brother but they're all dead now. My eldest sister died when she was 92, just sitting in her chair and went off to sleep, never wakened, my younger sister died when she was 86 and my brother died when he was in his 60's. So I'm left now, head of the family and they're all around me. I've got my son and my daughter and her husband and their three sons. Two are married in Norway and the other one's married in London. And Brian has Stephen who lives at the top of the road and he has two charming children. Grace will be three in March and Ella will be eight in June. My granddaughter Karen is across the road and a great golfer and she teaches the younger ones, there's a lot of young ones in Scotland, very keen on golf. And it's not just golf, they're all swimmers and there's a swimming pool and community centre not far from here where we have all the exercises you want to try. Oh, that's what passes the weeks so quickly, hearing what's going on and what they're going to do.

I've been in Juniper Green 34 years now and I had to stop the Townswomen's Guild, but I joined the Rural and they wanted me on their committee and I said "oh no" - I had my husband to look after by this time. But for all that, I said "I'll do anything for you, crochet and knit, anything," so I did and they made me an honorary member with the Rural. I wasn't even on a committee but that's what they thought of me, all the work that I had done. And then there was the Friendship club: There were just a number of the ladies and on a Thursday afternoon, we went to the church hall and we had speakers and a cup of tea. And at the beginning of the winter we'd have a communion service and the minister would come, so we got to know all the people in the village. And we all thoroughly enjoyed that.

The Friendship club is still going on, but I'm not walking now, I need to be taken in a chair. There are steps up to the church, so I can't go now, it's a pity. But I'm still interested in what's going on and I have the ladies coming to me, I've always got somebody popping in and having a chat with me from the church and from the Rural and just in the village, they'll pop in. You see, if they're going to the shops, they'll come along Belmont Road and come in and see me for a wee while: "Do you want anything from the shops? We'll get it for you." They just like popping in and having a chat and telling me what they know about what's going on in the village, you see.

I think of going to bed about nine o'clock and by the time I do go into the kitchen and just clear it and go upstairs, I'm up just after nine. And by the time I get ready for bed, it's usually ten o'clock and I'll lie and sing for a while. I've always been used to going to bed at midnight with the television and if I go to sleep before midnight, I waken at three o'clock in the morning and then I have to go to sleep again till eight o'clock or half past seven. I'm a good sleeper. This morning, it was five past seven I awakened at and I thought "oh well, I've got half an hour till half past seven", then I get up and get dressed and washed.

I have carers Monday to Friday about 8.30am. By the time they come, I've already had my breakfast and they ask "what else can we do?" Well, I let them clean the commode and make the bed but I say "I've had my breakfast," but they're so obliging and they like to have a chat with me. I have them in from 5 to 6, they're only in for a wee while because I can't lift out the frozen meals from the microwave, I haven't got the strength in my hands now with arthritis, so I let them do that. But we're chatting all the time and oh, it's good fun now, I love the carers, they're so caring and all that snow that was up out, I said "men wouldn't do what you're doing." They came in through the snow and they had a spade with them to help themselves, most of them have cars but they had to give them up because there was too much snow in all the

alleyways. But I look forward to them. So I've always got somebody coming, yes. They'll always say "It's Anne this morning, I was here before." I say "yes, I remember you," and as soon as they come through the door they'll say "Marion," and I say "yes, who is it today?" and they'll tell me who it is. And they're all so nice and so kind. They say: "I've done all I should do, can I help you in any other way?" So I'm very, very lucky, yes.

What's important to me now is my health. I'm not seeing well, the professor impounded a lens in one eye but I've still got a cataract in the other eye. This eye, after I got it done, was leaking and I had to go to the hospital. and I said at the time, I said "my eye is leaking," Well, I went to the hospital, that was over the weekend and they said "oh, your eye has sealed itself." I said "oh, fancy, I prayed that it would and it's happened" (*laughs*). So we'll say it's a miracle (*laughs*).

So never give up. I don't think of things, I don't think of death, I just think of living and what I'm going to do and what I'm going to enjoy. I'm hoping I'll have another miracle. I've prayed to God you see and there's that nice song, *Oh, what a friend we have in Jesus*:

*Oh, all our pains and grief to bear,
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer,
Oh what peace we forfeit,
Oh what needless pain to bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer*

If I could wish for one thing now it would be that I could walk and not have people pushing me around in my chair. If I could walk, I'd be away on a flight and away, here

and there. I'd like to go right up to the top of the Baltic Sea along the different places with Poland and Finland. I would love to be able to go abroad and see the places I haven't seen, yes. But what can you do at 102? I'm satisfied you ask me that, "what would I wish to do?" That's the kind of thing I would love to do if I was able to do, but I've had my day and I realise that. So I've just to be contented, that's what the carers say to me, "oh, Mrs ..." she says "och you still enjoy life" she says "we've got old people and they were wishing they were dead, they're fed up." I said "oh, that's not the way to look at life" I said "it's up to yourself what you make of it."

On my 90th birthday, I got a helicopter flight as my present. You went down to the gasworks at Granton and the flight went up from there, and it flew up to the Forth Road Bridge. I said "oh, this is lovely and of course, below your feet, you could look down to the earth because it was black... black... glass and I said "oh, you can look down the way and up the way." And there, when we came to the Forth Bridge, we had a wee run around there and then over the top of my house and right up past Longstone, Kingsknowe, the Braids and from the Braids, it went over to the golf course away over Duddingston, and then from Duddingston, over the castle and from the castle, down to Leith and over the water at Leith. And then it went along by Granton and down, that was my helicopter flight. I said "oh, this is lovely, it's a pity you can't go right down to North Berwick" (*all laugh*). You saw everything differently from what you were used to, and it was just lovely. And on my 92nd birthday, we all went ten-pin bowling, we always do something.

On my 100th birthday I had a cèilidh with over a hundred people and oh, did they all enjoy it, we had some dancing and I got the boys over from Norway. The boys were all in their kilts and the girls were in the national costume and the village crowd, if they had a kilt, they put it on and it was just lovely, that was my 100th. They're wondering when I'm going to have another one (*laughs*). They all said they had never

had one like that before, so they all enjoyed it. Oh, the place was beautiful and the talk of the village... oh, they were all wanting to come, and we had a lovely meal and wine flowing and dancing and the wee tots, there were two babies there in their wee buckets, you know, that they push about. So that's how I've got to be a hundred because I've enjoyed everything and I'm still enjoying it and it's passed so quickly. I said "look at my birth certificate, I don't believe it."

I'm 102 in four weeks time and we're going to the club house and having a nice lunch, there'll be 12 with two children. We'll maybe have another cèilidh for Juniper Green one of these days, but I think it could wait till I'm 105. I can't take money with me, there're no pockets in a shroud, so I get rid of it. We had a good time getting rid of the money the last time. So I'm looking forward to that ... well, it's only three years and they'll pass like that.

So I'm hoping I'll be able to still live on and see everything about me, that's all I want, to live in my own house and carry on. Doreen's golden wedding is in three years time, so I'm looking forward to that, and to Karen teaching Ella to play golf. I said "now Ella, you stick in because you'll maybe play for Scotland." So I'm just interested in what they do and as long as I carry on in this house, that's the main thing. I've got birds out there at the back and they chirp every morning to get their breakfast. And I usually do two pieces of toast, one for them and one for myself and do they enjoy it! And they get nuts, the coconuts, they are well looked after out there, so what have I got to do? I couldn't get a nicer wee house, so I'm fine and that's my life now.

CHAPTER 15

JESSIE

Born October 1908



Introduction

Rita, Jessie's daughter, met me (Tina) at the Aldershot railway station and drove me to Jessie's place. Whilst in the car I was given a pictured record of Jessie's life her daughters had created to celebrate having lived for 100 years. On the way to the care home, where Jessie has been for only three weeks, I heard about Jessie's recent turbulent past. In February 2010 heavy snow had prevented access to Jessie's house. Subsequently she could not receive health care delivery service as the district nurse could not visit to dress her multiple leg ulcers. Lack of care had compromised her health and safety made the situation at home untenable. This centenarian had to leave her own home, forfeit her independence and go into a care home.

Fortunately the care home is close to her previous abode so that Jessie's friends can drop in during the day. She is also receiving the care she needs as I noticed later that her leg ulcers had started to heal.

Janet, Jessie's elder daughter, was waiting for us. Janet had been asked to help Jessie groom for the occasion and she looked stunning, obviously taking great pride in her appearance. Her daughters explained that they 'love her to bits', and they were very pleased to be part of the interviewing session. I explained that the aim today was to listen to the words spoken by their mother. So they sat quietly on their mother's bed during the interview with minimal interruption.

Jessie gave a 'clean version' of her life. She was very aware that this story would reach the popular press. She did not talk about her father's heavy drinking and its traumatising effects on the family or why, as an eleven year old, she signed the pledge never to drink. Instead she was keen to paint a rosy picture stating over and over again that she had had a very happy, happy, happy childhood. Jessie survived diphtheria as a teenager and until her recent heart attack had enjoyed good health.

Lack of education was her biggest regret; she told us about her love of reading. In a family of ten siblings, as a child, she would read by hiding in the toilet with a book.

Her daughters thought she would talk about her various roles of employment in service as parlour maid. She was in service from the age of 14 until 32 (when she married) but Jessie choose only to talk about two occasions when she had felt wronged and left her place of work. Her Faith in God was the most important reason for being alive today and her conversation was about helping others as her motivation to live. In common with other centenarians, she dealt with stress in the same way. 'If you can't do something about it, you've just got to get on with it'.

Jessie's story

I was brought up in a big family, ten of us. Although we were a big family, we were poor. My mother and father made the most of it, you know, they were caring. We had an acre of land and we kept chickens, a dog, a cat; we had everything to make children happy. One of the things that stands out in my mind is making up plays to act for my mum and dad. We would do all kinds of things: whistle pipe, a mouth organ and use various simple instruments to entertain them. They used to sit one side of the fireplace and enjoy it. It was very simple entertainment. We had a good, good childhood.

We lived in a home called Yewtree Cottage. It was a very ordinary life perhaps, but it was a happy one, a very, very happy one. I was free to roam. Children don't have much freedom now. I feel sorry for them because they've lost their freedom and going around on their own. Now they can't do that. We'd go mushrooming, picking all kinds of wild things. We picked bluebells I can remember:

*I'll be your sweetheart
If you will be mine
All my life
I'll be your Valentine
Bluebells I've gathered,
Keep them and be true,
When I'm a man
My plan will be to marry you.*

Although we were poor we had this great big orchard farm where we had plenty of apples, pears, all the fruit you could mention. And my dad kept pigs. When it was right to kill one he would distribute it to different people. Some people used to buy a bit of it and some of it was smoked into bacon. We used to eat a lot of pork. You'd

see Dad and he'd have it laden in mustard and the fat would be trickling down his chin. We were fed well; I think that was a good start. We led a very simple life, we didn't have many clothes, and they were always second-hand ... but food ... my mother was a wonderful cook. My dad looked after the garden with my brothers, planting the potatoes and doing all kinds of things outside, cutting down the shrubs and apple trees. They led a very busy life.

My first remembrance is going to primary school. I walked a mile each way to school, to Chobham Village, from a tiny hamlet called Penny Pot. It was called Penny Pot because when my dad was young, he told me, they used to sell beer there, a penny a pint, so they called it Penny Pot Lane.

There were several boys who walked the miles on the same lanes to school but they were not very nice with birds. I was very fond of animals and birds. One day we were going home from school and this boy got hold of this little helpless bird and he was going to kill it. And I said (*shouts*) "don't you dare, don't you dare", I said "that's one of God's little animals and he wants you to look after it, not hurt it." Anyway, I think it stopped him but it made me think about how people treat each other and animals, that's the key to it, yes, the key to it. I was about nine years old then.

I was an avid writer, oh yes, and a reader, I used to go in the toilet and read (*all laugh*). My mum used to look for me and she didn't have to look far, she knew where I was. I love music. We never got that far with my mum and dad but mind you, they liked it, they loved hearing it but they didn't play anything themselves. We made our own music.

Mum belonged to the Church of England but I don't think she went to church regularly and my dad didn't, I know. But I think they were quite content in their own way without the church. My dad was very strict. We sat at the table for a meal and if we said anything that wasn't correct, he'd say "you leave the table" He wouldn't have nonsense. So we have lot to thank him for really. I went to Sunday school at five years old, regularly. The children of the village used to go to the Church of England, that was their church, which of course, we respected. I went to the Chapel. But we were all friends together although we were different opinions and that did not matter so much. I have been going to church ever since. It is my life. I enjoy the attitude of being a help and a joy to others. I just thank God for all his goodness to me down the years, you know? He's been a wonderful person.

I left school in October, after my 14th birthday. I went into service, to a lady at Slough in Buckinghamshire. Anyway, I was there a year because this lady, she began to treat me just like a bit of dirt, a bit of dirt, you know? As if I was nothing or nobody. She would send me out on a Sunday afternoon to clean the yards and sweep and do all kinds of odd jobs, jobs you don't give a little girl. Well I left because she began to behave so strangely, I couldn't tell you how... she was a funny lady, well she was no lady, not really. I used to take her children to school every day, a boy and a girl and they were beautiful children, they really were and we used to have great fun together. I was not much older than the children.

When I left this service I went back to the family home and after a week or two, I got a job with a solicitor. They had two children. The girl was a bit crippled but we were great pals. I learned to ride a bike with her, she said "Jessie..." she said, "you ought to learn to ride a bike", she said, "...it would be good for you". And she said "...it would help me to go out and ride with someone." So that's what we did, we palled up and we went everywhere together. And she often used to say to me "what would I do without

you?” She said “you can do things that I can’t do.” I said, “Well, this is what we’re here for, to help one another.” I was in service with this family for two and a half years. The reason for leaving there was that my mum had an illness and needed my help at home. So this lady said to me, “it’s either you or her, either you go home or you stop here with me.” I said “I’m going home to look after my mum”, which I did do till she was better.

I was about 17 years of age when I worked for a vicar very near Yew Tree Cottage. And I don’t know where I got it from but I had a very, very sore throat and eventually, I had to go and have it tested. I had diphtheria. So there was me, stuck in a hospital for six weeks at Ottershaw, not far from Woking. But I learned to do lace crocheting. That is the only illness I’ve had until now.

Then I worked at Farnham for ten years for the Managing Director of The Times of India and they spent six months in India and six months in Farnham. They left the staff behind to look after the house. So we were able to invite all friends and relatives over to stay for six months of the year, as long as we kept the house clean. I became the head parlour maid, they didn’t have a butler, so eventually I did all that work the butler would have done. I think they had about five staff plus a couple of gardeners.

When I first got friendly with Ben I was riding my bike. That’s how I first met him. We cycled from Farnham to Aldershot to the same church on Sunday. I was about 26 I think, and we didn’t go out together at first... we got friendly gradually, very, very gradually. Much later he took me to Hampton Court and there we were talking and he proposed to me. We felt we loved each other so that was the most important thing. And he was one of these steady people, very, very careful in his way of living. We got on very well together.

We got married many years later; it was the war business you see. It was not until 1940 that we married when I was 32. For a while we lived at Heath End in Farnham. It's just the next town from Aldershot. I worked in the laundry for the war. I also did the sewing, I mended all the uniforms.

It was the middle of the war that I had Janet and I was living with Auntie Harris. Auntie Harris was a Maltese woman and she came home from Malta to be with her husband. But when she got home, he was a rotter, he was no good. She had to finish with him really because he was so thoughtless, heartless and not nice to her two boys. So we became 'the family' during the war years. I helped Auntie by teaching her to cook, teaching her to wash in the English way and doing lots and lots of little jobs, a bit of sewing. We grew great friends, great friends. She kind of built me up as well.

When the bombs were going over we had to crawl under the stairs because it was so dangerous. Once I came home from a sewing class and was walking up the hill and the bombs started exploding. So I got home, just got in, when a Canadian convoy went by and they had lights on, that was awful, so with that, I went in the lodge where Auntie was and we went under the stairs. We had to, to get away from it. We were under the stairs all night. When I looked up in the morning our curtains were all torn, wet. There was quite a lot of damage. But you had to take it, you just had to take it.

Ben was a lovely man. At the beginning of the war he went about all over the country, building, because he was a bricklayer, repairing people's houses and offices that had been bombed. Hard work, but he did that and used to come home once or twice. Later he went in the Army, he was transferred to the Fleet Air Arm. It was six months before

even he saw Janet. That was hard for him and it was hard for me. But there we are again; you take it in your stride. He was discharged from the services in 1946.

Ben and I had a vegetable garden, a long vegetable garden where he grew everything; carrots, onions, beans, potatoes, everything that was possible for eating. And I used to do the flowers but he did all the hard digging. I did planting out and weeding, I used to love it. I made plum jam, apple jam, blackberry and apple, all kinds.

It is marriage, it's half the battle dear, it's no good trying to be against each other; you've got to pull with one another and help one another, be partners. He was a dear in every way. When we had babies he'd change nappies. If I had flu or anything wrong with me, he'd take the baby upstairs and feed her. He died in 2003. I suppose, naturally, I would have loved to have still had my husband, because we were pals. Well, love is very important in life and him and me, we didn't have a show life, not like some people, but it was earnest and true.

Friends are so important they make up your life dear, they do. I've been blessed with this long life and it's been wonderful how things have worked out. I've been helped all the time, because people say "oh, you don't believe in God". I said, "I do" I said "what would I do without him?" I said "he guides me, he's kept me, he's fed me, he's helped me every step of the way" and I said "...and I had a wonderful husband, I've got a lovely family. All I can say is that if God hadn't helped me through life like he has and given me many, many, many joys and sorrows, I couldn't have coped, but because he's there, he's been able to help me.

No I don't think I've had a lot of stress in my life. It's been pretty tough leaving my own home in Farnham, but for the sake of my husband and his physical state, we

moved. He was getting very distressed, so we, as a family, decided to go to Bourne Court. You've got to remember that life isn't all honey as they say and it isn't all smooth, we're bound to get a bit of roughness. I manage because I'm a tough old girl.

If I'd had an education I would have liked to have been a doctor. I'd love to have been a doctor because I can see the good, the kindness, the love and all the care that these people give to us now. My advice is, think of other people before yourself. You take it in your stride and that's the only thing to do dear, to share and help and do what you can for other people.

CHAPTER 16

FRANK

Born February 1910



Introduction

In February 2010 I (Tina) interviewed Frank who had reached his 100th year earlier that month. Born and bred in Birmingham, he lives in sheltered accommodation with his wife. The couple share two rooms next to each other. Meals, clothes washing and cleaning is done by the facility owners. His wife is 92 years old and has dementia. As carer for Mary, he had just finished helping her to the bathroom when I arrived. I later heard that he provides showering and all other personal care for Mary. Although he finds the caring role tiring and it does not leave him much time for painting, an activity he has enjoyed since childhood, he just 'gets on with it'.

Four of us sat in one of the rooms overlooking the garden. Marge, his daughter was present during the interview. Frank did not need any prompts to tell his story and there was a lot of laughter and banter throughout the interview. His daughter said at one stage, but Dad you haven't yet talked about me being born!

Frank's story

I was born into very poor circumstances in Smethwick, on the outskirts of Birmingham. At that time last century, all families, everyone had very poor conditions. All people of our standing were very, very poor and I mean poor. But mother must have done a very good job looking after us, you see, there were eventually four children in the family, how she managed, I do not know. From what I can remember, food was very hard to come by because there was no money. I lived on bread and dripping, I don't know how mother made the dripping but she used to put rosemary seeds on the top. It was called rosemary lard. Then she used to buy a pig's face and boil it and scrape all the meat off the bones, press it and have it cold. It was called brawn. Mother would buy the cow's udder- it's a big piece of meat- and she'd boil it and boil it and boil it and then slice it. This is the sort of thing we lived on. This was how we survived. My parents didn't grow their own vegetables. How they managed, I just don't know. I remember the chitterlings. We ate eat things that we wouldn't touch today, brains and very cheap offal. And you never left anything on your plate. 'You'd have to eat that up: eat it up, it'll do you good' and you were sort of forced to eat it. If there was nothing else, you would be hungry.

I was one of four. My sister was twelve months older than me and then the next brother was two years younger than me and then the third brother was seven years younger than me. Only my sister has died, the others are still alive, so the youngest is 93. We are a long-lived family. Dad lived till he was 84 but mother lived till she was 91. But luckily, I have always been blessed with very good health, throughout my life I've had very good health. My visits to doctors are very, very few.

I attended school but poor circumstances meant I had to leave at 14 to work. My dad was able to get me a job as an apprentice to a wood engraving firm. And I served the apprenticeship till I was 21, which was the year of 1931 when there was a great countrywide strike, everybody was out of work. I was out of work for very nearly two years, doing odd jobs, gardening, doing anything that I could do.

My mother had been to the classes of St. John's Ambulance and she was very well known throughout the district. If anyone needed any help, it was always 'get Lucy Swan'. She would buff and deal with any situation. If it was somebody who'd fallen and broken something, she would see them to hospital. If somebody died, she would go and 'lay them out'. I remember that very well because when I was unemployed, the local grocer died and she asked me to go and shave him. So I went along and shaved this dead man. After that I found I was following in my mother's footsteps. If anybody wanted something doing, I'd go and do it. Whatever it was, "I'll come and do that for you." Someone would say: 'I wish I could get somebody to help me on my allotment', 'I'll come and dig your allotment', and if somebody says 'I wish I could get that chimney dropped', 'I'll come and drop that chimney for you'. It's been like that throughout my life, I am always ready to help somebody.

During my apprenticeship, I was able to acquire an Alsatian dog and every morning I used to get up reasonably early and take my dog for a walk. And as I was walking the dog, I used to notice a girl walking to work you see, and after quite a long time or rather it seemed a long time, we hadn't spoken and she suddenly came and said "I do like your dog, isn't he lovely?" and a little bit of chit-chat. And she said "can I walk the dog for you?" So I gave her the lead and lo and behold, that started a friendship which eventually led to marriage.

Mary and I were courting for nine years, I just hadn't the means, money-wise, to be able to propose a marriage. I gradually started saving, eventually, on four pound a week, I proposed to Mary and we got married in 1936. I had always said during the early days of our marriage that owing to the fact that wages were so low, I couldn't see how we could afford to have children. I stuck to that opinion for a long, long time. And then accidents happen and that was that. Our only child Marge came along in 1945.

After the 1931 strike I was out of work for roughly two years. My brother Reg was working as a personnel manager and he was able to get me a job in an iron foundry. Now, the iron foundry trade was a very heavy job, a very dirty job and we had to work long hours, but anyway, I gradually went on. I must have made myself very noticeable because after nine years, the foreman approached me: would I help him out while he went on holiday. "I don't know anything about it", I said. "But I'll try." So I became an assistant foreman to the head foreman and very gradually - he became poorly health wise - I took over. When he died they asked me if I would carry on with the job. So I became a foreman and I remained a foreman for 31 years.

The foundry was doing work for the motorcar industry, but then when the Second World War came along, we had to turn a lot of our work into Army materials. Of course, we all had to go to register. I registered for the Air Force. But we had instructions from government that we were excused Army life service because we were in reserved occupations. We did a lot of marine work using cast iron and then we developed an aluminium foundry. It became a very big Birmingham industry eventually. Altogether I worked in the Smethwick foundry for 41 years. Unfortunately the manufacturing industry all collapsed.

When I proposed marriage we had to look around for somewhere to live. It was very normal in that particular time to rent two rooms for ten shillings a week. But I met someone and was talking about this issue and he said to me “well, why don’t you come and have a look at these houses that they’re building in Langley... I think you’ll like one.” I said “alright, I’ll come and have a look”. So my wife and I went along and we liked it. I approached the estate agent about it. I found we could buy this house for £420, or have a mortgage, which would cost us nine shillings and 10 pence a week. I could buy this property, two pence a week cheaper than I could rent two rooms!

That started us on the property ladder; we moved into this Langley house and we stayed there for 18 years. I was gradually getting better wages and by this time, I moved on from my bike to a motorbike and then from a motorbike to a car, and having the car, we used to go riding round. And coming through Hagley one day, we saw a great big notice about a new estate being built, so ‘oh, let’s have a look at it’. We had no idea of moving, we were just being nosey! We thought the houses looked very good, we decided to have one and we moved to Hagley. Unfortunately it was a long journey, about 10 miles, for me to get to work.

We were in Hagley for 18 years. But in 1963, we had a friend who lived in Minehead, and she said to us, “why don’t you come down and have a weekend with us ... and have a look at these flats they’re building ... I’m sure you’d like it in Minehead”. Of course, we went down and sure enough, the flats looked very, very nice. It was a residential affair and you had to buy the flats. We bought a flat and spent many years in Minehead. We used to travel all over Somerset and Devon, we got to know that part of England very, very well, there’s beautiful countryside down there.

I've slipped up a long way back; I forgot to mention that my first wife died in 1980. I was on my own for two years when I saw an advertisement by Age Concern in the paper which proclaimed that they were recruiting pensioners for a club in Stourbridge. 'Pensioners wanted for an activity holiday in the Lake District'. I hadn't had a holiday for a long, long time and somehow the activity holiday just struck a chord and I thought I'd love to go on that. So I went to the club introduced myself and asked if I could be accepted. Apparently the Round Table had made a big donation to them. So I was accepted to go on this activity holiday.

I went by coach up into the Lake District and we were taken to a great big scout encampment, just a lot of wooden huts. But when we got there, the organiser said "well fellas, I hope you'll help the ladies with their cases" so of course, big-hearted Arthur says "I'll carry your case for you", and that's how it started, that's how I met Mary, my present wife. And we've been together now for 26 years.

We were taken yachting on Lake Ullswater. There were about five of us on the boat with the organiser's son as the skipper of the boat, so he did all the steering. During this little boat trip, he told us what he was going to twist the boat round and as the boat keeled over like that, he used to fling himself back out, over the back of the boat with his toes on the edge. I thought 'if he can do that, I can do it'. I saw that he had to put his feet under the strap and the next time he said 'tack' - turn the boat, he went straight over the back of the boat, so I went with him. And plop, the strap broke, so we were both in the water. What an experience! Being soaking wet, the organiser said "oh, I'll get you to the shore" so of course, he was straight off and got us back to the landing stage where the coach was standing. The driver of the coach saw me get out of the little rescue boat and said "ah, I've got a pair of overalls you can borrow so you can get changed." So he gives me this pair of overalls and I go into the coach to get

changed. Who should be sitting there but Mary. I had to strip off and get into the overalls. So that was quite an experience.

After a long time living down in Minehead, I was getting on in years and my wife lost her eyesight in 1998. Mary's son and his wife used to ask us to come up to Hagley for a weekend, which we did several times, but at this time when I was talking about we ought to go into a home or think about it, we came up to Hagley for the weekend and of course, the conversation included what we'd been talking about. And Gaynor, that is Mary's son's wife, she's an ex-nurse and she knows a lot about houses and all that sort of business and she says "well, there's a nice Abbeyfield House in the village, would you like to have a look at it?" "Well, why not?" So we came along and she went up to the door and we came in to have a look at it. And it came to pass that they'd got rooms available, so could we see them? They told us we were very lucky at that particular moment, they'd got two rooms available, so, 'well, I don't know, I'll think about it'. 'Well okay, you go home and think about it but if you could let us know in a couple of weeks time, we'll temporarily reserve them until we hear from you'. And after due consideration, 'I think we'll have them, so that was it. We came into this sheltered accommodation in 2004. We've got two rooms together, which is as good as having a flat.

I've got a permanent job looking after my wife. Her memory is not very good and she is blind. It's a full-time job to get her washed and dressed. I'm more than a carer to Mary, I'm a nurse. I do everything: looking after her medication in the morning I get her a meal of cereals, and every morning she has plenty of fruit. I am feeling the pressure of it but I just get on with it.

When I've done my chores and after I've got Mary ready in the morning I have my coffee. The other big thing I'm very pleased about, throughout the whole of my life, I've not drunk a lot of alcohol. I'll take a glass of wine occasionally, I like a glass of cider occasionally, but I like a little tot of brandy in my coffee, so every day, I have a little tot of brandy in my coffee. But I think because I've had no alcohol to speak of, it's kept me in good health.

I think I'm in good health because I'm a big fruit eater. I have bread and butter and orange. I eat a lot of oranges; I believe that the Vitamin C in the orange has helped me. But there's other things that come into it. Now, when I was young, everybody smoked, it was a tradition, the old-fashioned Woodbines, everybody smoked. Until I was 17 and I had pyorrhoea - gum disease - and they gave me a little tiny bottle of aromatic vinegar to paint them. Oh it was vile. I stopped smoking. The next day, I couldn't face a cigarette and I've not smoked since I was 17. That's something I'm very, very pleased about.

From early on in my life, I'd always been a very, very keen cyclist, which was a lot of exercise, which all helps my health I think. I used to cycle everywhere. I bought a second-hand bike to start off with, it cost me 15 shillings, how I got that 15 shillings, I don't know. I progressed a bit later on to be able to buy a new bike, two pound 4 shillings and 9 pence. I was about 16. Then when Marge was small we used to go on a motorbike; Marge would sit in the sidecar with all the suitcases (laughs). It was good fun. I stopped driving the car in 2004.

I'm interested in watercolour painting which started when I was at school. We used to have a painting class, they were not called 'art classes' in those days, and it was just something to pass the time away. One day; they asked us to draw and paint the

blackboard. I must have made such a good job of my drawing and painting that he congratulated me on it and he says, “I want you to stop and finish that so I shall excuse you going to the next class.” So when all the class had moved out, I was sat there going away at it you see, and that’s how it started. Now, since then, I’ve been very interested in watercolour painting. I have quite a few paintings here. I look forward to doing more painting in the future.

Summary

What are the secrets?

What are the secrets?

There are few 'secrets' living to be one hundred but after some pondering, each centenarian had something to say and luck appeared to be quite a key component. Alex was quite sure that there are no secrets to living to be a hundred. 'As far as I'm concerned, it's just luck, sheer, sheer luck. That's what I think, honest'. For Alison reaching hundred: 'It's luck, because I didn't do anything about it, I've just enjoyed life'. Emily described herself as lucky despite many losses in her life, including the deaths of her husband and three sons while Frank said 'luckily, I have always been blessed with very good health, throughout my life, I've had very good health. My visits to doctors are very, very few'.

Inevitably food was also mentioned. Olive thought longevity was related to leading 'a good, clean life', not drinking excessively and she denounced smoking. Olive, like several others, talked about their early years and their access to good nutrition. Although not being 'well off' her mother was a good cook and a normal diet included suet puddings, 'lovely' dumplings and cake. A time when food was plentiful was recalled with a glutton's delight 'I remember once when my dad had a job, we went away to the seaside and we ate a whole leg of meat in one meal'.

Minnie said 'I like vegetables ... I like my food, I like good food and I think there are far too many artificial things on the market now'. Making food from scratch was important. 'Getting a nice piece of meat, a bone or something, and making soup and making a casserole' was Minnie's idea about good nutrition. Frank believed one of the 'secrets' is eating a lot of fruit: 'I think I'm in good health because I'm a big fruit eater. I eat a lot of

oranges; I believe that the Vitamin C in the orange has helped me'. When he was young, everyone smoked, 'it was a tradition, the old-fashioned Woodbines'. He tried it but thought it was vile, 'I've not smoked since I was 17. That's something I'm very, very pleased about'.

Similarly Albert chose to talk about a long standing daily routine that included making his own porridge every morning, and gave us a porridge cooking demonstration. He did not have a secret to share but thought perhaps long life was programmed in your genes and family background. He acknowledged the contradiction, stating that on his 'mother's side did we have good genes, but on my father's side we didn't'. Hard work, regular exercise and dancing well into his 100th year were thought to be beneficial.

Alex was quite sure that there are no secrets to living to be a hundred and as well as 'luck, sheer, sheer luck' when he thought about it a bit longer he laughingly said: 'Well, I eat good food and I eat quite a lot of food really, yeah. I don't like to feel hungry ... and I've kept fit, I will say that much'.

Meg talked about time spent on her grandparents' farm each year and the annual food parcels containing mealy puddings, pork and chicken that would be sent in the post to the family's Glasgow tenement after the pig had been killed. Jess also spent time in the country on her grandfather's farm as a child and learnt how to milk cows and drink the fresh milk from her 'tinny'. Meg attributed her good health to the outdoor life. She said 'we went rambling in the country at the weekends, which was good. I liked the outdoors, yes. You often wonder if that accounts for your life too, getting all that fresh air and the stamina you had to put into it'.

Nita has always had a passion for dancing and swimming and was active until these were curtailed by her recent illness. Swimming was a social event as she explained ‘everybody knew me, yes everybody, all the swimmers’. Staying connected with people was highly valued. Nita said ‘I’ve got loads and loads of friends’, they were all waiting for me to come back to the centre, you know. I’ve been going there for 21 years’. Although not openly declared by Nita, a sense of belonging may be conducive to living along life. Belonging to a dancing or swimming group, attending her Jewish club meant that she was reaching out socially. In so doing she was acknowledged as a person, promoting self esteem and reaffirming her identity. Maintaining social connections and being valued as a person was a key characteristic important to most centenarians.

Living a long life is ‘just living sensibly quite honestly’. Phyllis idea of living sensibly was also related to food and its nutrition. Until recently, she grew her own fruit and vegetables, a gardening skill learned out of necessity during WW2. Eating chocolate daily, she confessed, was her only addiction. Having a strong interest gave Phyllis the motivation to continue living; playing bridge almost every day was all consuming.

Meg could not commit to having a longevity secret. A generous disposition toward others was possibly the key she thought. She looked for ‘the best side of people’. She did not allow herself to be swallowed by negativity. In the same way Jessie’s advice was, ‘to think of other people before yourself ...You take it in your stride and that’s the only thing to do ... to share and help and do what you can for other people’. Both women have a positive regard for others. Frank shared the lifelong characteristic in being ready to help others; even now he provides 24/7 care for his wife Mary in their aged

care facility. Generosity in giving to others is what he shares with Meg and Jessie.

Olive's advice was to stay connected with family and friends and to take an interest in the world. Emily thought that people should look after themselves. Albert's advice and building on Emily's suggestion is that people take responsibility and look after themselves. Edward echoes the advice of other centenarians by taking an interest in the world and staying active saying 'Rusty? Not me! If you have a complicated piece of machinery and you didn't work it, it would rust and decay. The more we exercise the better we become. There you are, that's what's happened with me. I've never been idle, I've enjoyed doing big heavy work; I've made lots of things, trolleys and wagon bodies, wheels, everything that's made of wood. Yes the body is like a piece of machinery, if you don't use it, it will rust and decay'.

Generosity to others is foremost in the minds of centenarians. They appear to have a great deal of time, patience and capacity to love their fellow human beings. Albert said 'I think it's nice to try to be good and kind to everybody, you know, you don't want to have enemies'. Minnie likes to 'keep going for a start... and I like to see people coming in, I like to meet people'. Her advice is having an attitude about life that is 'about tolerance and patience'. She recognises diversity but respect has respect for differences. She said 'Yes, you are entitled to have your opinion, but we're all entitled to our opinions'.

Some of the centenarians had received awards in recognition of their achievements. Alison had received the MBE in 1991 for services to the Arts, Edward had received a 'Neighbour from Heaven Award' for his work with local

children while Alex had been commended for bravery during his 25 years service in the Metropolitan Police. Jess aged 75 won a National Competition, for her traditional cloutie dumpling and she also made tapestries for exhibitions and raffles and gave the money to breast cancer research in memory of her sister who died of the disease.

Being social

Being social continued to be important. Regular friend and family contacts were highly valued. Alison reminded us that the ‘only thing is my friends have all died. A lot of them, well my Art College friends have all died off’ although she continued to stay connected to her family and younger friends. Albert was sure that what was important to him today ‘are friends, good friends... You can’t do without friends really and having good relationships with both children’.

It was clear that a supportive network of family and friends was important in their lives. When we interviewed the centenarians the conversation was mostly in the company of a son or daughter. Maintaining these relationships was one of the most important survival characteristic. Sons and daughters were keen to promote their parent as exceptional and becoming a 100 was seen as a reason to be proud and celebrate. Meg said:

One of the most important events in my life is my family... when I turned a hundred, that was a lovely feeling. We had all these different events and all the excitement, which was great. I got over 200 cards. We had a party and people came from all over the world. And then ... the Friendship club had

a party for me a couple of weeks later and even the bingo hall had a big party. I know I'm quite popular.

Olive saw her daughter every second day, Emily's son took her out to an Age Concern lunch weekly while Albert and his daughter Shirley went out to lunch at the Age Concern Centre most days. He was well known in Deal and people greeted him as he walked around the town. Hettie also walked several miles with her daughters as well as regularly attending concerts organised by Musicians Against Nuclear Arms (MANA). As a long standing activist, she had attended a concert the night before our interview. Nita lived with her daughter in Bury and her other daughter's family travelled from London to see her every second weekend.

Alison laughed when she said:

Living to be a 100 wasn't my idea! I've just enjoyed life and go on enjoying it. I celebrated my 100th birthday with a big lunch party for friends and family. I've been awfully fortunate with friends and relatives.

Minnie did not have children but was surrounded by her sibling's offspring, for whom she cooked soda bread each Saturday. At Belmont Avenue, where she lived since her marriage to Jim in 1936, the first person to arrive would claim the soda bread. Mary, her niece said:

Auntie Minnie has lots of friends and they might be granddaughters, daughters of her friends, but they still come to see her and they still come to look after her because they love her. She helped them when times were tough'. Further Mary said 'Auntie Minnie is a very independent woman, she only has her home help

for an hour in the week and she has a person check every morning to make sure she's okay.

One of the ways the centenarians' maintained their social connections was through their involvement and interest in collective activities such as arts, crafts, sport, gardening and like Minnie baking. Alison continued to make her own Christmas cards. Edward as a former woodworker made beautiful cradles at the age of 97 to give to his own and other people's grand children and great grand children.

Centenarians are good at handling stress

What do centenarians have in common other than their extreme age? Ways in which they dealt with stress is a shared characteristic. These older people did not ignore stress; rather they were very good at handling stress and loss. They appeared to accept their losses, grieve and then move on: Jessie said, 'you take it in your stride', Olive retorted, 'Well you couldn't do much else than plod on'. Hetty and Nita both talked about being able to sleep very well at night and leave their concerns behind. Meg, after talking about rationing after the Second World War said: 'people just got on with it. You had to just carry on'. Bob thought that dealing with stress in his life was one of the secrets to living a long life and although not succinctly stated by sixteen centenarians, they shared stress shedding capabilities. Here is what Bob had to say:

I have a capacity for withdrawing into myself and letting the world go by and this may have something to do with my being the middle one of a large family because I already had, as a child, a capacity to withdraw with a book, to a corner in a very busy house where

everything was going on. And I could be lost to that world in a book, sitting in a corner behind the sofa, reading and everybody would say, “Where’s Bob? Where’s Bob? Come on, what are you doing there?” But I had a capacity for retreating, if you like, psychologically, to a place where I was alone and I didn’t have to worry about what was going on outside.... So yes, I suppose it helped me to cope with what could have been stress, but I could easily say “well, there is nothing about this situation that I can do. I can’t alter the fact that Japan has invaded or attacked Pearl Harbour. So I don’t need to worry about it because it’s not my business.’

Phyllis verified that in dealing with stress ‘you just have to cope with it, don’t you? I’m afraid I’m one of those resilient people, I don’t just sit down and cry when it comes, I’ve just got to get on with it’. Phyllis just gets on with her life and Jess attributed it to determination and the willingness to make changes in her life.

Getting on with life is a skill but Emily was not able to say exactly how she deals with stress and significant losses except ‘just get on with life’. Albert agrees and claims life is what you make it. About stress, Albert’s motto is ‘if you can’t change it and alter it, don’t worry about it’. Nita advised that if ‘you can manage it ... try and push worry away and not be miserable. Try to be happy and try and join in every day with what’s going on. Worry kills you, so if you have it, push it away and forget it. Think about being thankful to be alive’. In talking about how Minnie deals with stress in her life she said ‘if you get worried, really worried about something, there’s usually someone that you can talk things over with and whether they can help you or not doesn’t always matter. It’s always something that will probably resolve itself, you just don’t know’

What is important now that you are 100 plus?

If illness had been experienced by centenarians, it had predominantly been in the last two years although chronic conditions were mentioned by some. Women in particular complained about living with arthritis, though they had learned to self-manage this over the years. Hearing loss was quite common but the latest technology hearing aids had made this manageable. Loss of eye sight was often considered the most significant problem. Not being able to read, or to connect with the world outside when vision had deteriorated, was experienced as a great loss.

If I could wish for one thing now, what would it be? Olive's wish would be 'to make my legs walk'. Nita said; 'I used to have the most beautiful eyes, they used to say, 'your eyes are arresting' ...yes, I'd like to be able to see a little bit better and hear a little bit better. I'd manage if I had those two things; I'd be able to live a bit better'. Marion's eyesight had deteriorated and she wished for better vision. And like Olive, Marion wished that she could walk and 'not have people pushing me around in my chair. If I could walk, I'd be away on a flight and away ... to the top of the Baltic Sea along the different places with Poland and Finland ... But what can you do at 102?' Marion declared that she'd never give up. 'I don't think of things, I don't think of death, I just think of living and what I'm going to do and what I'm going to enjoy'.

Edward's independence was important; 'I am self-sufficient in a way, I do 'all the essentials' myself. I do like to stay in bed until 11am. I still like my red wine and I like going out. When I am home during the day I re-live

some of my past, otherwise I look outside and watch the birds. I take some medications for my heart. This is all coal for the donkey’.

Most centenarians emphasised the importance of ‘going out’, leaving the house, and being outside. Alison said: I don’t go out by myself. I can’t walk, I’m too wobbly’ and she relied on others to take her to art exhibitions but Bob was self reliant, he consulted his diary before he could fit the interview into his busy schedule. We wanted to go out for lunch after the interview but one foot of snow outside had turned to ice and made the walking conditions precarious, so he made lunch at home. Minnie was frustrated when the snow in Belfast kept her indoors for a few weeks. Emily was relieved when the snow began to disappear and she could go with her son to the weekly ‘Old Age Pensioners’ club. Edward enjoyed going out to the theatre and Albert loved dancing. Phyllis set up a bridge club in Eastbourne and continued to play bridge most days of the week. Nita was pining to continue with swimming and dancing activities. Jess would like to keep on travelling: ‘Yes, there are still places I’d like to see’.

Minnie’s wish was that ‘I could have had more education’. Leaving school aged 13 and going into service had not been her choice and she regretted only that she had not pursued further education later in life. Minnie was not alone in her wish for an education that circumstances of poverty had denied her when young.

All centenarians had been married and had lost their spouses, some many years ago. Yet when asked what they wished for the return of their partner at their side was the desire most often requested. Bob’s main wish was that his wife was still alive. He’d been 15 years living alone since her death. Meg

was sure that family was the most important thing in her life and she shared Bob's wish about her spouse still being around. She said: if I could wish for one thing now it would be that my husband had lived longer. Aye, I think that's the most important, because we were really very happy together'. In her mind, Alison was still in communion with her husband even though he died many years ago. She said 'he's always there, he's never gone'. Alex said that if 'I could wish for one thing now, well, I mean that's rather a personal thing, but I suppose it would be to have the wife back'.

Another wish Minnie exposed was that she'd like to die in her sleep, and 'give no bother to anybody'. This wish to die in one's sleep is certainly not unusual amongst centenarians. Meg laughed about death when she said: 'I don't want to be any bother to anybody'.

About the future Alison said 'I'm perfectly happy to go on as I am, I'm not wishing for anything and I'm glad I've got good health, that's an enormous thing. I've just enjoyed life; I haven't any other recipe at all. I can't say any one thing is important, but if you're keen to do a thing, get on with it and if your work is acceptable, be jolly glad. Yes, I've been very grateful'. And Frank wants to continue doing water colours. 'I look forward to doing more painting in the future'.

Marion has hopes for the future too she said: 'I'm 102 in four weeks time and we're going to the club house and having a nice lunch, there'll be 12 with two children. We'll maybe have another cèilidh for Juniper Green one of these days, but I think it could wait till I'm 105. I can't take money with me, there're no pockets in a shroud, so I get rid of it. We had a good time

getting rid of the money the last time. So I'm looking forward to that ... well, it's only three years and they'll pass like that'.

Conclusion

There is abundant media coverage surrounding people reaching the age of 100. Birthdays are celebrated with 100 balloons or 100 roses or with 100 people. Becoming a centenarian attracts media attention and readers want to know the secrets of ageing well. Although there are few 'secrets', we have been able to share excerpts of centenarian stories yet we can see that the centenarians seemed to share characteristics of resilience; indeed Phyllis described herself using that term. Furthermore, we observed that centenarians shared the common characteristic of wanting to maintain social connection with other people.

Health is normal in old age. Degenerative conditions such as deafness or visual impairment do occur, but many conditions can be allayed by treatment and self-management. Serious illness can be overcome and centenarians can sustain or even improve their health. None of the centenarians who participated in this study were intellectually frail. Whilst physical strength may decline with age it had only been relatively recently that some of the centenarians had experienced this. A few people were exceptional continuing to dance, swim or exercise regularly. Indeed these centenarians represent the prototypes of successful aging. Meg said she felt younger now than she did in her fifties while for Olive 'The nicest thing about being 100, is that I don't want to get old, I'd rather get younger.'